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THE

'Hamer's best novel yet.'

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TESS WOODS

**A family dinner, a mysterious guest –
death is on the menu ...**



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‘Blending the relatable with the extraordinary, Cassie Hamer hits the sweet spot with her debut novel, *After the Party* ...’ —*Daily Telegraph*

‘An enjoyable and often emotional read.’ —*Who* on *After the Party*

‘Cassie Hamer creates a complex cast of characters and circumstances in *After the Party*, which leads to moments of hilarity, poignancy, and drama. Hamer

strikes a careful balance of these elements to craft a novel well worth a weekend on the couch.' —*The Chronicle*



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CASSIE HAMER has a professional background in journalism and PR, but now much prefers the world of fiction over fact. She is the author of three novels, including the Australian bestseller *After the Party*, and her stories focus on ordinary characters who find themselves in extraordinary situations. Cassie lives on Gadigal Country in Sydney with her terrific husband, three mostly terrific daughters, and a labradoodle, Charlie, who is the least demanding family member. In between ferrying kids about and walking the dog, Cassie is working on her next novel, but she always has time to connect (or procrastinate) with other passionate readers via her website—CassieHamer.com—or through Instagram where you can find her @cassiehamerwriter.

Also by Cassie Hamer

After the Party
The End of Cuthbert Close
The Truth About Faking It

CASSIE HAMER

THE
STRANGER
AT THE
TABLE

FICTION



www.harpercollins.com.au/hq

To my amazing sister, Sadie. I am so lucky to have you in my life.

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Prologue

Christmas Day

'Pretty quiet, huh? Might just make it back in time for pudding, touch wood.'

Stevie taps the steering wheel with his index finger, then rolls the ambulance through a roundabout. They're only a few kilometres from base, fifteen minutes left on their shift. As far as Christmases go, this has been one of the better ones. On the warm side, but that's to be expected.

They've had the usual—kid with a broken leg from the new scooter, overzealous dad falling off the ladder trying to reattach the fairy lights, and an eighty-nine-year-old tripping on a bathmat thanks to too much sherry before ham.

Stevie's work partner, Lina, sighs with a withering glance. 'You used the Q-word.'

'What? That superstitious bullshit? I love walking under ladders, you know that.'

He's trying to lighten the mood, but Lina's face is stony and Stevie gets it. Right now, her three kids, eight nieces and nephews, three siblings and assorted older folk are at her home chowing down on a full turkey banquet—a feast Lina prepared in the dawn hours of this morning before work but will not eat until 6 pm that night when they clock off because she's too busy saving drunk idiots and stupid kids. She even missed out on seeing her kids opening their gifts—the ones she bought for them on Santa's behalf. No wonder the woman looks murderous. Stevie would too. People wax on about the spirit of Christmas like it's some other-worldly, religious animus that springs spontaneously from the pores of humans. Actually, the spirit of Christmas is an overworked, underpaid mother who's just trying to make sure her kids have a great day so they don't grow up to be adults who accuse their parents of not loving them enough.

The job dispatch console lights up with an alert and Lina shoots him another dirty look.

She reads it aloud. 'Waratah Heights. Adult male, age unknown, with serious head injuries. Witness says he's not breathing. Possible cardiac arrest.'

Lina's hand pauses on the receiver.

‘Just give it a moment,’ says Stevie. ‘Might be someone else who can take it.’

It feels like minutes but is probably no more than five seconds until Lina sighs and picks up the radio receiver. ‘Ambulance control. This is unit 35 responding. We’re on our way.’

*

When Stevie pulls up outside the address, he clocks an older woman pacing the median strip. She comes to Lina’s door, pale and handwringing. Starts speaking before they’ve even opened a door.

‘Thank god you’re here. He’s out the back … a fall.’ She points, finger trembling.

‘If you’ll give us some room, we’ll be inside in a moment.’ Lina is firm and calm. She’s as good at triaging family bystanders as she is at treating patients.

‘Yes. Yes. Of course.’ The woman follows them to the back of the ambulance. ‘But. Please. Hurry. He’s … he’s not breathing. And the blood …’

Stevie goes for his jump bag. ‘We’ll be as quick as we can.’

Paramedics don’t run. It’s one of the first things they teach in training. Sure, in Hollywood movies you might see an ambo racing towards a burning building or sprinting towards a car wreck. But running is dangerous and a paramedic never wants to become the patient.

‘What’s your name then, love?’ asks Lina.

‘Margaret. Margaret Hardie.’

‘All right, Margaret. How about you go ahead and make sure the doors are open and the path is clear?’

‘Yes, yes. I’ll do that. Just come through the front door. He’s … he’s out the back.’ Margaret sets off down the flagstone path, past the life-sized wire-framed reindeer and a blow-up Santa that’s slumped like he drank too much port at Christmas lunch. Dangling over the front door are stands of fairy lights which must look incredible by night but appear straggly in the glaring arvo sun.

‘My kids would kill for this kind of setup,’ says Lina under her breath as they pass under the unlit fairy lights. ‘Who’s got the time?’

The house is strangely quiet. The loudest sound is Lina and Stevie’s heavy boots on the polished wooden floorboards. Margaret’s gaze flits back every few seconds, as if she’s worried they’ll disappear or get lost—but that’s not possible in this single, long hallway. There are closed doors to each side and from behind one comes the sound of quiet crying. Kids, maybe? Stevie keeps walking until the hallway opens up into an open-plan kitchen and living room with high ceilings and two large skylights. Just like the outside, there’s a strong presence of Christmas cheer with almost every wall bearing strands of tinsel.

The tightness in Stevie’s gut loosens just a little. The worst emergencies to

walk into are the ones where everyone's screaming and carrying on, where there's a palpable sense of violence in the air. That's not what's happening here. Not outwardly.

'He's here out the back. Through here.'

They pass through the kitchen, past the gravy congealing on the stove and the remnants of a turkey carcass on the bench. The dining table is loaded with dirty plates, paper hats and shredded bonbons.

'I'm so hungry right now,' murmurs Lina. 'I could eat an entire turkey leg.'

'Not long ...' Stevie says, as if he really knows.

They emerge from the house back into the sunshine and onto a back deck that falls away into dense, scrubby bush. They don't call this the leafy Upper North Shore for nothing. To the right, where Margaret stands, is a staircase that leads down to a scrubby garden and dense bushland beyond with eucalyptus packed tightly as broccoli heads. 'Down here. Please, come.'

Stevie pauses briefly at the top of the stairs. Either someone has thrown a vat of cranberry sauce down them or their patient is in a bad, bad way. He sucks in a breath and picks up the pace. At the bottom is a huddle of four adults—two women and two men—and the body of an adult male whose skin is pale and waxy. His eyes are closed and a pool of blood spreads on the pavers like a halo around his dark hair.

One of the women speaks into a phone. 'They're here. The paramedics are here now.'

An authoritative voice comes through on speaker—ambulance control. 'Okay, Ellinor, I'll leave you to it, then. Keep going with the compressions until they tell you otherwise. You've all done a great job.'

'What do we do? What now?' A second woman—a bit younger than the one on the phone but with the same hazel eyes—looks up at Stevie and Lina and he double-takes at the abrasions across her jaw and the beginnings of a bruised chin. Her mascara has run and pink lipstick is smeared across her face. Her voice trembles like tinsel in the breeze.

'I can't ...' One of the men, who's been doing chest compressions, collapses back on his haunches, fingertips still resting lightly on the patient's chest. 'I can't,' he gasps.

The other man hasn't spoken. Hasn't even blinked. He's got a small cut on his cheekbone and he stares, unseeing. Shock, at a guess. Stevie's gut squeezes. Maybe they should be calling for backup.

'Mummy. Mummy. What's going on down there? Is someone here? We heard people in the house. We're scared.' Two small faces appear like mini moons through the slats on the deck above.

'Marianne, they have to stay upstairs,' orders Ellinor.

The younger woman with the runny mascara—Marianne—leaps to her feet. 'Girls, stay right there. I told you to stay in your room, now go back there. Do not come down.'

Stevie gets out the blood pressure cuff. The patient's skin is clammy to

touch. 'When did you start the CPR?'

'I don't know. When we rang the ambulance.' The man who was doing the compressions looks in desperation at his watch. 'About ... About ten minutes ago. I don't know. Maybe less.'

'No pulse.' Lina looks up at Stevie. He zips open the bag with the defibrillator.

'Can you give me a quick summary of what happened here?'

No one speaks. Strange. Usually family and friends can't get the words out fast enough. Stevie looks up. No one meets his gaze. 'Anyone? Did anyone see what happened?'

Finally, the non-shocked man speaks. 'Uh. No. We were inside, eating lunch and suddenly there was this awful ... Crashing sound. We came out and he was ... He was here. Like this. We rang triple-0 straight away. He wasn't breathing. I couldn't feel a pulse. They told us to start CPR.'

Lina pauses from compressions and Stevie unbuttons the patient's shirt to give them better access to his chest. 'So I take it he fell from the top of the steps?'

'Will he be okay?' says the woman who rang the ambulance. 'Will he live?'

'We're doing our best,' says Stevie tightly. 'Can you at least tell us who this is? His name?'

Again, no one speaks. This time, it's annoying. What's wrong with this lot? The guy's in seriously bad shape. 'Not a trick question, people. I know it's a shock but the more information you give us, the better we can help. You know this man, so please tell us who and what we're dealing with?'

This time Margaret speaks, and her voice is cold. 'We don't know this man at all.'

1

5 December

Marianne

I could kill for a drink right now, like that Aperol Spritz at the end of the table. Or a gin and tonic with a twist of lemon. Even the chablis that the mum next to me is drinking, crisp and pale as straw—cold, too, judging by the condensation. Maybe I could just lick the side of the glass?

‘So, how are the girls settling in, then?’

A harmless question and it’s asked in a casual, almost disinterested manner. But in the forty-five minutes since the halo-making working bee began, it’s also the first question directed straight at me.

‘Fine. So far, so good. Everyone has been so friendly and welcoming.’ I take another wire coathanger from the table and start bending it out of shape, exactly how we were shown by the chief class parent.

‘That’s good to hear. It can’t be easy for them, starting so late in the year, and term four is crazy. Bloody sustainability. Don’t know why St Paul’s couldn’t just buy the angel costumes like everyone else does. No one has time for this.’ The woman—Jamila, according to her name sticker—huffs in a way that makes her lips flap. ‘Where did you say you came from?’

‘Uh. Couple of hours north of here. On the coast.’

‘Lake Macquarie? Central Coast? I’ve got a brother who lives in Gosford.’ Jamila snips the wire with secateurs and grabs the silver tinsel.

‘A bit further north.’ Andrew and I practised answers at home—how much I could say, what I should keep private. We agreed that ‘north coast’ was honest but sufficiently vague.

‘Nice part of the world,’ Jamila nods. ‘So what brought you to Sydney?’

‘My husband got a job transfer.’ Again, not a lie but not quite the whole truth either.

‘And what does he do?’

‘He’s a lawyer.’

‘Ri-ight.’ The way Jamila stretches the vowel indicates that those three

words have told her nearly everything she needs to know about us—that we are a respectable, wealthy, law-abiding family. The butterflies that have been doing somersaults in my belly for the past hour now restrict themselves to basic handstands. Maybe Andrew was right. Maybe it was a good idea to come along tonight.

In the eight weeks since the girls have been at St Paul's Primary, we've received an email nearly every week asking for parents to volunteer for this, that and the other—excursion chaperones, tea-pourers for the grandparents' day and whizzes with self-adhesive to cover new library books. But these opportunities come with one essential requirement: you must be on the school's volunteer register, which demands a working with children check—a police clearance I have little hope of receiving.

'I can't ... do ... anything at this school. They don't want me.' After the third cheery volunteer call-out, I'd gone to Andrew in tears.

'What do you mean? Of course they'd want someone like you.'

Through filmy eyes, I gave my phone to Andrew to read the email.

'You need a background check to be able to cover library books?' he muttered. 'What do they think you're going to do? Violate the latest David Walliams?'

I let out a strangled laugh. 'It's not funny.'

His expression immediately darkened. 'Of course it's not funny. It's ridiculous. It's ... it's discriminatory. Would you like me to email them and explain? Maybe they could make a special exception, ensure there are no kids around when you're there.'

I grabbed the phone out of his hands. 'No way. No one can know.' I pointed the phone at him. 'No one.'

A week later, a different email had dropped into my inbox.

Nativity Working Bee

Hello lovely Year Two Parents and Carers,

In preparation for the upcoming nativity play at St Paul's, I will be hosting a costume working bee at my house on Monday 5 December at 7 pm. In keeping with the school's sustainability principles, the wings and halos will be made from recycled household items (list below). Feel free to bring along a plate of nibbles and perhaps a little alcoholic Christmas cheer.

Best, Victoria (Year Two Class Parent)

I'd read the email twice—just to double-check that I hadn't missed those four nasty little letters, WWCC. With a bud of hope in my chest, I forwarded it to Andrew with a changed subject line. *Nativity Working Bee—I think I can do this one. YAY!*

Andrew had replied in seconds. *You definitely can and you should! Double yay! And I'm tipping it's a pretty nice house, given the address.*

The address? I'd been so obsessed with looking for a WWCC reference, I hadn't even thought to look.

48 Greenleaf Road, Waratah Heights.

Nerves struck up a fugue in my belly. I googled the address and up

popped a real estate listing from the last time the property was sold two years ago. *Mansion* was the word that sprung to mind. St Paul's is a Catholic private school, but one of the cheaper ones, so while I expected the parent group to be middle to upper class, in keeping with the leafy Upper North Shore, I hadn't anticipated rubbing shoulders with Sydney's elite. Christ. Rich people meant education, entitlement and a genuine love of society gossip.

From the road, the house (Cranfield Park, according to the gold embossed sign affixed to the sandstone wall) was even more grand than the images had suggested. At the gated security intercom, I'd pressed the buzzer and tapped my fingers against the steering wheel.

‘Yes?’

‘I’m ... I’m Marianne Antonio. I’m here for the nativity working bee.’

‘Park to the left.’

The wrought-iron gates swung open and my slightly shabby Subaru crunched its way along a gravel drive that ran all the way to a cream-brick, Georgian-style home complete with a colonnaded front door. I swallowed the saliva that had pooled in my mouth and fought the urge to wrench the steering wheel to the right and hightail it, *allegro vivace*, out of there.

You’re here for the girls. You can’t be the outcast forever. It’s not fair on them.

Walking towards the glossy black door I clutched my tote bag more tightly as if it were a safety harness. Seconds after pressing the brass buzzer a woman wearing a black canvas apron opened the door.

‘Marianne? Welcome. Come in, come in.’

‘It’s so nice to meet you and thank you for hosting.’ I thrust out my hand. ‘Victoria, isn’t it?’

A ripple of confusion wrinkled the woman’s smooth complexion. ‘Oh, no. I’m not Victoria. I’m the housekeeper, Janet.’

‘Oh, gosh.’ I put a palm to my forehead. ‘I just assumed. Sorry, I’m an idiot.’

Janet waved away my embarrassment. ‘Happens all the time and honestly, I take it as a compliment.’ She leant in and whispered conspiratorially, ‘I won’t tell, if you won’t.’

Having offered to hang my coat and take my bag (both of which I declined) Janet led me down the parquetry hall to a closed door from which came the filtered buzz of women talking. I took a deep breath and Janet swung open the door to reveal a group of fifteen or so women, all seated around an oversized wooden dining table. Almost as one their faces turned towards the door and I briefly contemplated grabbing Janet’s hand for support.

‘Marianne, welcome. Come take a seat.’ A blonde woman at the head of the gothic table leapt to her feet and came towards me with her hand outstretched. ‘I’m Victoria.’ Her smile was wide and her teeth gleamed under the light of the chandelier.

‘Thank you for hosting this evening.’

‘Not at all. Thank you for giving up *your* night to help us make some

Christmas magic for the kids. Angels.' She sighed and made a face. 'Oh, the irony. Mine can be right little devils.'

For a second, the knot in my belly loosened. Maybe this woman had perfect teeth and a home that belonged to *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*—but she was still a mum who struggled with the job just like the rest of us.

'Can we get you a drink? Champs? Sav blanc?'

'Oh, ah, not for me, thank you. A mineral water would be lovely.'

'I think we can do better than that. G&T? Espresso martini? Janet can drop you home if you're worried about breath testing.' Victoria frowned. The grazing platter on the sideboard groaned with expensive white cheeses, rich pâtés and artisan olives. In the middle of the dining table strewn with tinsel, coathangers, white stockings and feathers, was an oversized champagne bucket full of French bottles and melting ice. This was a consummate entertainer and I was a guest in her home. It was her responsibility (her pride and joy) to make sure I had a good time and if I didn't that would be a poor reflection on her and her hostess abilities. I had learnt quickly that people (those who didn't know my past and these days, that was everyone) always wanted to know why I didn't drink, mostly so they could work out if I was sitting in moral judgement of them, or deliberately trying to sabotage their fun. Victoria wasn't worried about me, she was worried I was going to ruin everyone's good time.

In an ideal world, I would have put my hand on her forearm and told her, *It's nothing to do with you, it's all me. I'm not a killjoy. I don't need alcohol to have a good time. Actually, I'll have a great time if I don't.*

But I did not do this.

'I'm taking antibiotics at the moment. Getting over a bad throat infection.' For added effect I coughed as if clearing phlegm. 'Doctor's orders.'

'In that case—' Victoria's face relaxed into a smile. Illness was always an acceptable excuse. 'Evian it is. Now, come and meet the girls.'

Once the initial introductions had been made, the women settled back into standard womanly chat. The latest nit outbreak (*Honestly, it feels like there are some parents who just don't care! They're ruining it for all of us. You can literally see the poor child scratching her hair out.*) The outrageous price of organic raspberries (*Tommy dropped one on the kitchen floor yesterday and I told him I'd taken a dollar from his bank account since that's how much they cost me.*) And the devastating earthquake in the Middle East (*It's horrifying. All those lives lost. The school should do something. How about we approach Devonport about putting together a charity drive?*).

The longer it went on the more I relaxed. There was no pressure to participate or offer an opinion and it was enjoyable listening. It felt ... normal—a sensation I hadn't experienced in so long. Maybe I could have one sneaky drink to cement the bond with my new mum tribe?

'Ooh, look, you've pricked yourself. Let's get you a tissue.' The woman to my left—Jamila, the shiny brunette—noticed the sprout of blood on my index finger.

‘Oh, god. Sorry.’ I jam it between my teeth and the flavour of salty iron swills about my mouth.

‘Here, I’ll take you to the powder room.’

I follow Jamila to the door, grateful the others don’t lift their heads from their halos and wings. The last thing I want is to make a scene or be the centre of any kind of attention—good, bad or indifferent. All I want is to blend in.

She stops at a white panelled door and pushes it aside to reveal a gorgeous mini-bathroom, complete with a Hollywood mirror and a marshmallow-pink vanity. I grab a handful of tissues from a silver box holder and press them around my finger. Jamila watches me in the reflection of the mirror.

‘I don’t know what it is, but I feel like we’ve met before.’

I squeeze my finger harder. ‘Oh, really. What makes you say that?’

In the naïve part of my mind, I’m hoping she’ll say it’s because I’m friendly and easy to talk to, that she feels comfortable in my presence. I’d had parents say this to me before, in my past life.

Because Jamila can’t possibly know me. Not really. I’ve worked so hard to change my appearance, to the point where there are times I look in the mirror and barely recognise the pale, plump brunette staring back at me. It’s almost a surprise, but a good one, to see that the freckle-dusted slim blonde has gone.

Jamila cocks her head. ‘Something about your face is really familiar.’

I move to the side of the mirror, out of its reflection, but keep my back turned to Jamila. My ribs squeeze like the bellows on a piano accordion. ‘Oh, people say that to me all the time. I must have one of those very basic faces.’

‘No. It’s something else.’ Her brows furrow as she squints, then lists off a few possibilities—the gym, her favourite café, the kids’ sporting teams.

I could lie. What harm would it do to declare how I, too, was obsessed with the matcha lattes from Kitchen Green? But I’ve learnt that the best way to lie is to play dumb or tell an incomplete version of the truth. I don’t frequent cafés. Caffeine is a stimulant, which rules out tea and coffee, and as I’m not working I don’t feel justified in buying expensive breakfasts that I can easily make at home. Andrew has told me on numerous occasions that I should treat myself more often but it doesn’t sit well. I don’t have the right to indulgences.

‘Maybe we’ve seen each other in passing at the school gate?’ I ask. My finger has stopped bleeding but I wash my hands for good measure and keep my head down to avoid eye contact. My heart is thumping so wildly, so *scatenato*, that it’s a wonder Jamila can’t feel its vibration in the air.

‘My husband does the pick-ups.’ Jamila folds her arms but makes no move to shift off the doorframe to let me past even though I’m clearly ready to leave. She studies me and I curse the incredible bathroom lighting that’s highlighting every distinguishing feature on my face. ‘It’s so strange. But it’ll come to me.’ She taps the side of her head. ‘These things always do.’ Her

words bounce off the white-tiled bathroom like a threat.

I moisten my lips to speak. 'I suppose we should be getting back to it.'

'Suppose so.' She stands aside to let me past and all the way down the hallway I feel the weight of her eyes, following my every step. We're about to go back into the dining room when I feel her hand grab my elbow.

'Wait.' She lets out a gasp. 'Now I remember.'

2

5 December

Marianne

I'm not used to the darkness of our new home. It backs on to the national park and we're in a cul-de-sac where through-traffic is non-existent and streetlights are rare. Tonight, as I fumble at the front door with too-trembly fingers, the only sound is a chill wind through the trees and the twittering of bats. Quiet is what we wanted but I wonder if it's too quiet. All that wild bush. So much unknown. So many secrets. It is gorgeous by day, but at night from our back deck it's just a yawning expanse of ink.

I turn the lock and pad on tiptoes towards the kitchen where the oven blinks 22.28. Having disabled the alarm, I sling my handbag to the bench and I ignore the spill of contents as my wallet, hairbrush and assorted cosmetics go flying. What matters is that the wine bottle is tucked safely under my arm. I open the cupboard for a glass.

I have to drink.

The thought is so *fortissimo* and insistent that I almost expect Andrew to come running because he can hear it shouting through the silence.

But my husband doesn't come. The girls go to bed at 8 pm and he follows at 9.45 pm. He'd be upstairs twitching and snoring as he always does in his first hour of sleep.

Ring Anil.

This is exactly what sponsors are for—but I don't want to ring him. I don't want to admit how close I am to breaking my sobriety. I don't want to be talked out of failing because in this moment a drink seems the only sensible way of numbing my anxiety without dragging anyone else into my spiral of negative thoughts. It wouldn't hurt anyone. Andrew has made it clear that my sobriety is a non-negotiable in our marriage—the alcohol makes me a danger to the kids and distances us emotionally—but he would never know about my slip, neither would the girls. It's been so long and I've changed so much. Maybe I've reached that point where I can stop at just one or two?

Why shouldn't I test myself? Why not now when I can do it in secret?

With jittery hands, I take the wine glass from the cupboard, fill it with water and set it down. This is what I promised Anil—that I would drink water and wait for the feeling to pass. I breathe the way I've been taught: in through my nose and out through my mouth. But the urge for alcohol is so loud, it's screaming at me as I sit at the bench, palms on either side of the glass stem, the stone cool under my skin, the wine bottle to my left, with condensation forming like rain drops.

Jamila knows.

All right, so she doesn't exactly know my name but my face is in her deep subconscious and at some point when she's washing dishes or having a shower or walking the dog it will pop up like a jack-in-the-box and it will all come to her in a thunderbolt of knowledge. And she will tell all the parents because it's not the kind of information that a school mother keeps to herself. She'll say she's doing it for the benefit of the children, whose safety is paramount.

'You've been on TV, haven't you?' is what she'd said as she'd grabbed my arm in the corridor. 'I can see it in my head. You were on TV for something.' Again, she'd squinted at my face as if I were a code she was trying to crack and my knees softened like butter.

'Ah. No. That's flattering. But I've never worked in TV. I'm not quite the type.' I gestured to my soft body and less-than-glamorous attire of linen culottes and a loose collared shirt.

'Are you sure? Not in news or something? I feel like it was a serious job. Not acting or anything like that.'

My fingers curled into my sides. Damn media. What a pack of hounds they'd been, always trailing me down the street and shouting offensive questions they knew I couldn't answer. But standing in the corridor, I swallowed my bitterness and rearranged my mouth into a smile. 'Definitely not me. I'm a piano teacher. Kids, mostly.'

'That's so strange. Not a reality show, perhaps?'

'What, like *Married at First Sight?* Or *Survivor?*' At this, I laughed. The idea was so bizarre, so far from who I am as a person. 'Not really my cup of tea.'

'Oh, well.' Jamila had tossed her hair. 'Never mind. It'll come to me. Do you still teach? My Luna plays but she hates her teacher. I don't suppose you'd have space for a new student? She's supposed to be performing in the end of year recital but I can't get her to practise at all.' She made a face. 'It's going to be a disaster.'

'I'd love to help but I'm not teaching at the moment. I'm so busy getting the house sorted and settling the girls in, you know what I mean?'

Jamila turned the door handle and every cell in my brain screamed at me to get the hell out of there. I'd worked so damn hard to give my family a fresh start, free of the awful baggage of the past but here was Jamila, threatening to drag me back and destroy it all. There was no way I could teach her child, especially not once she realised who I was.

Fight? Or flight? I played the scenario to its conclusion. I could escape the working bee by feigning illness or family emergency and make my hurried escape back to the safety of my car, my home, my bed. But if I left in such a hurry, what would the other mothers think? There'd be talk, for sure, and maybe it wouldn't be unkind, but it would draw attention in exactly the way I didn't want. My entire *raison d'être* had become blending in and not being noticed. Being the new mum, taking off early from the working bee, these weren't the actions of a woman trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

So I stayed.

But I moved myself away from Jamila, down to the other end of the table. I sat myself back down in Victoria's velvet-covered chairs, I picked up the glue gun and I focused on making the best damn angel wings ever made. I absorbed myself in the job, to the point where one of the other mums remarked on my level of focus. When they rose for a drinks and nibbles break, I stayed at the table as if I had taken that glue gun and applied it to my bottom. All I had to do was hold myself together until 10 pm when the working bee would finish.

While I worked, I counted. Feathers. Minutes. Seconds. How many times Victoria said the word 'fabulous'. How many women at the table wore gold earrings. Anything to take my mind off the bonfire of anxiety in my chest.

On the way home, I'd wound down the window and swallowed great hunks of air like I'd been held underwater for too long. I breathed and breathed but nothing would extinguish the fire of fear in my throat. I needed alcohol. The bright lights of a drive-through bottle shop flared in my vision. I took it as a sign and stopped, my legs like water as I bought a bottle of rosé.

And now, here, with my glass of water before me, and the wine bottle to my left, the need is stronger than ever. I pick up the fine, Riedel glass, one of a set given to us as a wedding gift from my Aunty Del.

'I really do love them, you know.' Mid-packing our Newcastle home, I'd held them up to the light, one by one, shamed by the dust and streaks that had accumulated due to lack of use. 'Aunty Del would be horrified if we threw them out.'

'So don't. We'll probably need them for Christmas,' said Andrew, picking up a plate. 'Was Del the one who drank sherry in a schooner glass?'

The comment had jolted me out of nostalgia. Health professional after health professional had asked me if there was any family history of alcohol abuse and I'd always sworn there wasn't—Dad died when I was five years old and Mum has an ethanol allergy which means alcohol makes her extremely sick. Alcohol wasn't part of our upbringing or our heritage. Even after all the damage I'd caused and all the therapy I'd endured, I still couldn't apply the label to myself. In my mind, an alcoholic is a person who loves alcohol and needs it to get through the day. But that isn't me. I don't love alcohol. I don't love drinking. I found it useful as a mechanism to deal with a very specific set of circumstances. I hadn't needed it every day, just on the bad ones. But then the bad ones had begun to outnumber the good.

‘You know, if I didn’t have children, then I think none of this would ever have happened,’ I’d once told my therapist. ‘Not that I regret having my girls. I adore them.’

‘Marianne, we can never know if that’s true. About half of a person’s alcoholism risk is hereditary through the genes. The rest comes down to environmental factors.’

‘But I’ve already told you—no one in my family has a problem with alcohol.’

‘You’re sure about that? In my experience, some people, particularly those of the older generation, tended to go undiagnosed.’

At the time, I was quite sure and so was Mum. She was incensed I’d even suggest that her sister had been an alcoholic. ‘Del liked a sherry. Who didn’t back in the seventies?’

But sitting here, it feels like Aunty Del is taunting me with the wedding-gift wine glass. Like she’s giving me permission. Without something to calm my nerves, I’ll toss and turn all night. Keep Andrew awake, be grumpy tomorrow and not the mother I want to be.

But it is a major breach of trust. We’ve agreed that ours is a dry home, with exceptions for major celebrations with friends or family; they will suffer no more on my account, I’ve put them through enough already. At least one health professional had recommended we get a safe to keep certain alcohol-containing items like mouthwash, hand sanitiser and methylated spirits.

‘People do that? They keep mouthwash under lock and key?’ Andrew had exchanged a glance with me as if to say WTF.

‘When a person is desperate for alcohol, they’ll drink anything.’

At that comment, I’d felt stung. Judged.

But sitting here now, the wine within reach, the safe idea seems entirely rational. I am not in control. For a few seconds there’s silence and my ears pulse with nothing but the inner metronome of my own heartbeat. I tip the water down the sink, swipe the bottle into my other hand and head towards our back deck. If I’m doing this, I’m not doing it inside the home where my children are sleeping.

Outside, the moon glows like a white button and the trees let out silvery, musical whispers. I set the bottle and the glass down and take more deep breaths of the eucalyptus-tinged air with its hints of menthol and dirt. But there’s another smell, one that doesn’t quite belong. Smoke. I turn and that’s when I see it, the bright embers of a lit cigarette, glowing from my neighbour’s back deck.

‘Evening, Marianne.’ The smoker takes another puff. ‘How’s tricks?’

My insides crumple. I’m seen. I’ve been seen.

‘Oh, you know. Fine, thanks, George. You?’ I try to sound casual but my voice is a scratchy violin.

‘Never better.’ He lets out a wheezy sigh and a smoker’s cough. ‘Never bloody better.’

Andrew refers to our neighbour as the-crazy-old-queer-next-door but I

like George and his habit of blasting his classical music on high volume. I'm not sure he's quite altogether there, mentally. He claims Andrew has threatened to cut down his gum trees so that our house gets more sun but I think he's got that wrong. The bush is part of what drew us to this place. Yes, it's a little creepy at night but by day the wildness of it fills me with a sense of possibility.

'If you ever need a drinking partner, just sing out,' George rasps into the night air.

'Oh. No. This is non-alcoholic. I just ... I just like the taste.' My stomach heaves. I swallow down the acid rising in my throat. What if he tells Andrew that he saw me with a wine bottle? Jesus, I'm an idiot. This was a terrible idea. If my husband finds out, he won't forgive me.

'Don't we all.' He lets out a chesty cackle before stubbing the cigarette into an ash tray. 'Night-night.'

My hands grip the railing and I wait a few seconds to make sure that George has gone inside, then I take the wine bottle and throw it as hard as I can into the bushes where it lands with a dead thud. Heart racing at *prestissimo*, I rush back inside, cursing myself. I should be in bed right now, curled into my husband's back, a man who has stuck by me when others would have left long ago.

But there's a figure standing at the fridge door. Wide shoulders, hair mussed. My husband. He turns, eyes blinking, hand on the fridge door. 'Hey, where were you?'

'Just ... just getting some air.' I exhale. 'Bit wound up from tonight.'

His eyes travel down. 'And why are you holding that?' He nods to the Reidel in my hand, frowning.

To avoid his gaze, I put down the glass and set about collecting my handbag detritus back into the bag. 'I don't know. Just feeling nostalgic I guess, thinking about Del. It's only water. You can check if you like.'

He picks it up and sniffs. I hate that he can't completely trust me but I have no one to blame but myself.

'Do you think Del was an alcoholic?'

He pauses with the glass in his hands. 'The sherry schooners were probably a giveaway. But she was a jolly sort of woman. I think she drank for fun, not to drown her sorrows. So ... I don't know.' He squints in my direction. 'Why? What's brought this on? Did something happen at the costume thing? Someone upset you?'

I should tell him what happened with Jamila because if she does work out who I am, then it will affect Andrew as much as it does me. In the gloom of the kitchen light, a shadow casts across half his face that makes him look old and tired.

Before the accident, his hair was a lush brown woodland of locks. Now, it's almost entirely grey. Guilt forks across my gut.

'It was fine. Nice mums. Halos and wings all complete. The angels will be beautiful.' I consciously move my lips into a smile and Andrew's face relaxes

into a similar expression.

‘That’s good to hear. You deserve to have some fun.’
But we both know that’s not true.

3

6 December

Marianne

The bloodcurdling scream wakes me with a gasp, and I'm wrenched from sleep at the speed of light into a sound that douses my stomach with oily dread. Where's Andrew? Where are the girls? Blind with sleep I swat his side of the bed and come up with nothing but empty sheets and a divot in the pillow where his head should be. I skim down the stairs in the early morning gloom, heart knocking against ribs. In the living room, Harper stands like a statue. Lips in a perfect 'O' and a scream that rattles the glass.

There is something trance-like about the way she stands, her zombie-stare piercing the bookshelves. I shake her by the shoulders. 'Harper, Harps, stop. What is it? What's happened?'

'Look.' She speaks in a terrified whisper. 'Look what happened.' She points at the shelf. With my eyes still adjusting to the faint light, I can't see a problem. Is this a night terror?

'Honey, what is it? I can't see anything.'

She takes a step closer to the shelf and points again; this time there's a quiver in her finger. 'The Elf,' she says in a hoarse whisper. 'He's dead.'

I follow her gaze to a lower level of a shelf. A grinning face with pink cheeks and unblinking eyes stares back. At least one foot away, down on the floor, lies a torso and a set of stripy legs in angled positions that no human could ever possibly achieve.

'He's dead,' Harper sobs. 'And now Santa won't come.'

'Oh, honey. Come here.' I pull her in for a hug.

'Who killed him? Who killed Elfie?' She moans into my chest, her little body heaving against mine. 'Someone came in the night and chopped his head off.'

'Darling, no. That's not what happened.'

She draws back, eyes wet with tears. 'Then what? What happened?'

'Honestly? I don't know. Maybe ... maybe Ned got to him. Thought he

was a chew toy?’

‘But Ned’s in his bed. How could he get out?’

At the mention of the dog’s name, a soft whine emerges from the crate. She’s got a point. It can’t have been Ned unless the dog did it while I was out at the working bee. But surely Andrew would have noticed him monsterning the elf? By the looks of the stuffing, he’d really gone to town on the defenceless doll.

Who could blame him?

Much as I want this Christmas to be as perfect as possible for the girls, the elf is a colossal pain in the neck. All that moving around, trying to find new spots and think of different things to write in those nightly notes. And isn’t it a bit creepy to tell kids that they’re being watched all day and reported on at night? But Harper had insisted on having one; all her new friends at St Paul’s had them and news of their notes, exploits and the nightly treats was the talk of Year Four in the playground. I find the whole thing quite bizarre. To threaten to deny presents to children for a few minor transgressions is manipulative at best, cruel at worst. Deprivation is a word that doesn’t belong at Christmas, especially this one.

Harper throws herself back into my arms. ‘He’s never going to come.’

‘Honey, no. That’s not true. I promise. We’ll ... we’ll.’ I fumble desperately for a solution, sensing my own stress levels starting to skyrocket. The elf is my domain, my job and once again, I’ve failed.

‘We’ll ... we’ll get another elf.’

‘Noooo.’ Harper wriggles out of my grasp, her eyes wide with horror. ‘I only want Elf Jimmy. It has to be Elf Jimmy.’

‘Then I’ll fix him. I’ll sew him back together.’

‘You can’t fix him. He’s dead. Like those people from your accident.’

My gut contracts. My teeth clench and for a moment, I cannot speak. This is how it will always be.

‘Hey, what’s up? What’s happened?’ When the front door swings open, both of us pull apart. Andrew is dressed in jogging gear, the frown already written on his face. No doubt he heard us from outside.

‘We’re okay.’ I flick my eyes in the direction of the elf. ‘But some of us aren’t.’

He follows my gaze, sees the finger to my lips that instructs him to ask no further questions in the vain hope that Harper will quickly forget and move on.

‘Harps, how about you watch a little TV while I make breakfast?’ I give her a squeeze.

TV is never allowed on weekday mornings and I know I’ll pay the price with the girls in half an hour when they’re dragging their feet and refusing to switch it off. But right now I need its magical powers of distraction and capacity to soothe a devastated little soul.

‘Really?’ My daughter’s eyes instantly brighten. ‘*Bluey*?’

‘Absolutely.’ It’s almost educational, after all. At least, emotionally

educational. The number of times I've laughed, cried and nodded my head; Bandit and Chilli are the parents we all want to be.

Harper skips off towards the TV while Andrew approaches me in the kitchen, frown deepening. 'TV? Really?'

'She was beside herself,' I whisper. 'And you weren't here.'

'How did the doll's head come off?'

'I thought you'd know. Did you see anything when you came down this morning?'

'It was pitch dark. I couldn't even see my own shoelaces.' He taps the bench. 'What about Paige? Could she have done this?'

My first instinct is a firm no. Our sweet little seven-year-old is gentle and kind, the type who gets upset when we kill a spider or a moth.

'I mean, who else could it be?' Andrew repeats.

'But it's so ... It's not like her.'

Andrew raises his eyebrows and while he does not speak his expression says all the things he knows would hurt too much to say: that I've been away, so how can I possibly know?

'We need to sort this out, now.' I lead the way into Paige's bedroom and pause at the door. Her skin glows pale. She's surrounded in the pink bed by a rainbow battalion of soft toys. Breath catches in my throat, hitched on the love that's choking me right now. This child couldn't hurt a flea.

I wake my milk-sleepy daughter with gentle butterfly kisses over her forehead and cheeks. She tosses her head from side to side and a smile blooms through her lips. 'Mummy, no.' Her eyelids flutter and close. 'Stop, Mummy. I'm sleepy.'

I jostle her shoulders. 'Paige, baby. Paige, it's time to wake up. We need to talk to you.'

'It's important.' Andrew stands by the bedside, arms folded.

She sits upright in bed as the strains of the *Bluey* theme music filter down the hall. 'Someone's watching *Bluey*?' Her eyes narrow. 'Can I?'

'In a minute, darling.' I put a restraining hand on her arm. 'Sweetie, can you tell us what happened to Elf Jimmy?'

'Did he bring us a treat? Sienna's elf brought her a Kinder Surprise yesterday.' Her marble eyes glisten. 'I asked Jimmy to bring us one, too.'

'I'm sorry, honey, but no he didn't. Come here for a cuddle.' I draw her to my chest for a hug and shoot Andrew a 'see' look over her head. She can't have decapitated Jimmy, not if she was expecting a treat.

'Did you do something to hurt Jimmy? Use scissors on him or something like that?' asks Andrew, and Paige springs back off my chest.

'Like cut his hair?' Her eyes go even larger.

'No, more to hurt him. Cut off his head,' says Andrew.

'Someone cut off Jimmy's head?' Her lip starts to tremble. 'Mummy? What's Daddy saying?'

'Nothing, honey. Everything's fine.'

Andrew lets out a sigh and I have to control myself from leaping off the

bed and waving a finger in his face. Why can't he accept her desire for a treat as evidence she hasn't hurt the doll? Why does he always have to push and push for the truth? It's always been a common theme in our marriage, even before the accident. 'You need to be human first, lawyer second,' I always tell him. 'You have to switch off your lawyer brain sometimes.'

But for Andrew it's impossible. 'The law,' as he tells me, somewhat pompously, 'isn't a profession, it's a vocation. A calling.' He can no more switch off his lawyerly tendencies than I can switch off my maternal ones.

'We think that Ned got hold of Jimmy and accidentally chewed a bit of his stuffing but I'm going to fix him up. He'll be right as rain.'

'Will he bring us a treat tomorrow?'

'Absolutely. Now, why don't you run along and watch a *Bluey* with Harps?'

'Okay, Mama.' And out she flies, curls bouncing.

'It's not good for them, you know. To lie like that.' Andrew leans off the doorjamb.

'I didn't lie.'

'We don't know that it was Ned.'

'It wasn't you or me and if it wasn't the girls then there's really only one option.'

Andrew is looking at me with a strange expression like he is trying to decode me. Like I'm something or someone unfamiliar to him.

'What? Why are you looking at me like that?' I start fixing Paige's bed, smoothing sheets and tucking. Making order out of the tangle.

'I'm not. I was just thinking and I remembered something that I didn't tell you last night. Olly's booked the flights for Christmas. Arriving the 22nd and staying for a week.'

'With us?' I want my voice to sound neutral. It's not that I don't like Andrew's brother Olly, or his wife Che and their two little boys—I absolutely do. But my sister, Elli, arrives in a few days and Mum's coming down from Newcastle. The house, and my mental capacity, isn't big enough to accommodate an extra three adults plus children for an extended period. Then there's the ongoing feud between Olly and his dad, Frank—a fight of unclear origins that's pitched Andrew as the peacemaker.

'No, no. They'll Airbnb nearby. He's onto it.'

'And what about your dad? Is Olly okay about seeing him?'

Again, it's an effort to keep my voice light. Frank scares me and I don't blame Olly for having a strained relationship with him. He has that intimidating, authoritative cop aura about him, even though he's been retired for years. He can't switch it off, just like my husband can't switch off from being a lawyer. I've asked Andrew a few times what he was like when they were growing up because it's hard to imagine Frank being gentle and loving. He's brusque with Paige and Harper, always reprimanding them for being too loud or lacking manners. A couple of times, he's told Andrew and I that what our girls need is more discipline—'Children need a firm hand.' He says this

with a raised eyebrow that suggests the punishment should be physical, which horrifies me. Whenever we see Frank, I'm always careful to make sure the girls aren't alone with him—I don't think he'd smack them but I don't want to take a chance. I've asked Andrew whether his father was violent towards he and Olly when they were children. Did he smack them? According to Andrew, he was tough but fair. Big on discipline but not of the physical kind. Always let them know in no uncertain terms when they weren't meeting expectations. His mum died of cancer in her fifties so Frank has been on his own a long time, much like my mum. In our early dating days, we joked about the two of them becoming a couple—wouldn't that be funny. But that was before I really knew Frank. His stern, brooding nature is the last thing Mum needs and it's hard enough to have Frank as a father-in-law, let alone stepfather. We see him when we can, which is not often because he lives in Forster, a three-hour drive up the coast. But he and Andrew speak regularly on the phone and I always know when they're talking because Andrew goes outside, or into our bedroom. I'm not sure what they discuss—footy, Andrew's work, things in the news—but my husband always emerges from the conversations slightly glaze-eyed, like he's not quite present. Now, I know to just give him space until he returns to us.

'I haven't mentioned it yet.' Andrew scratches his head.

'Oh.' I straighten from making the bed. 'Are you sure that's a good idea? You will tell Olly at some point, won't you? I don't want a scene at Christmas, not in front of the girls.'

'No. Obviously I'll tell him. It'll be fine.'

That's Andrew-the-determined-lawyer speaking, assuming he can fix things with rational argument and insist his brother's tricky feelings defer to common sense with a 'let's just put it all behind us and move on' approach. But as I know better than most, many humans are ruled by the heart and not the head.

'Hon, are you sure you want to have them both?'

'What do you mean? Olly's booked. I can't uninvite him now.' 'But maybe your dad? He could come on Christmas Eve. Or Boxing Day.'

Andrew's eyes narrow. 'What? Do you not want him here?'

'It's not that. It's, just, I want everyone to be happy.' This is true. I do want everyone to be happy. I want the girls to have the Christmas of their dreams. But I also sympathise with Olly. Frank isn't the easiest man to be around and he sure as hell isn't my biggest fan. Who could blame him after what I put his son through?

'I want my brother and father to be with us for Christmas Day. That's what would make me happy.'

I look at my husband—a decent, loyal and somewhat stubborn man who has stuck by me when plenty of others would have turned and fled. I deposit a kiss on his head.

'Well, all right then. Let's make it happen.'

Andrew heads for the shower and a bark emerges from the living room.

Ned's still in his crate. I jerk up from the bed and hurry back to the living room where the poor doggy's been waiting an age for someone to free him. I let him out and a flash of white catches my eye. Caught in his bedding is a clump of fluff that looks exactly like elf stuffing. I hold it up, inspecting closely. A-ha! So it was Ned who monstered the elf. My relief is quickly replaced by irritation. It's beyond belief that Andrew didn't see the mauling yet he denies it completely. Before I can stop myself, I'm marching down the hallway to interrupt his shower and show him the proof. But a few steps from the door, I stop. I know my husband. He is stubborn. He won't change his story, then we'll fight about it and why make this into a bigger deal than it already is? He's got enough going on, we both do. He is a good man, argumentative at times but that's his job. If you want someone to argue that black is white, he's your guy.

So, instead of bursting through the bathroom door, I crush the stuffing—soft and pliable—into my fist. Then I trudge back to the kitchen where I chuck it in the bin. The slamming of the lid is like a full stop on the whole palaver. It's done. I've already moved on. Forgive and forget, that's my motto.

Or it should be.

4

6 December

Marianne

In the waiting room I can't stop my foot from jiggling. An older man, the corner of his hanky visible like a little semaphore in his pocket, issues a disapproving and pointed glance. Is he also here to see Nadine, in his pressed, checked shirt and combed hair? He doesn't seem the type to visit a hypnotherapist.

Then again, who is?

When I told Andrew my plan to unlock my memories of the accident, he certainly wasn't in favour. 'You're going to put all your trust in one of those people who waves a watch in your face and makes you quack like a duck? C'mon, Maz, get serious. It's not a proven therapy. These aren't doctors, they don't even need a degree. What you really need is a good psychiatrist. The right medication.'

'But I don't have a mental illness. I'm not depressed. I'm not suicidal.'

'You're anxious as all hell. Anyone can see that. You never sit still.'

'I'm excited to be home. I want to make up for the time I lost. Give you, the girls, everything we missed out on.'

'I think you need help. Proper, medical help.'

'I'm not going back on sedatives. Never again.'

In the end, I made the appointment without telling him. Yes, we'd promised no more secrets but I couldn't see the harm in this one. Some of the AA crowd had spoken in meetings about the success they'd had with hypnotherapy, how it helped them control their cravings and, as a by-product, they'd remembered events of the past they were sure had been forgotten.

'It's not always the drink that makes you black out,' Anil once told me. 'It's the shame.'

Since coming home, I'd had two hypnotherapy sessions and while Nadine understood my desperation to remember the events from the day of the

accident, she'd been clear from the outset that recovering repressed memory wasn't guaranteed. It wasn't even one of the aims.

'When you're so deeply relaxed, it's possible that things will come to you that haven't come before. But it's only a possibility, not a probability. What we *can* address is behaviour modification. Things you can do when that urge to have a drink becomes powerful.'

To my great satisfaction, there'd been no stopwatches, no quacking like a duck, just a deep sense of relaxation and focus. Even if Nadine and I never achieved the breakthrough I so desperately wanted, it had given me useful tools to deal with cravings. And right now, I'm working those tools hard.

When I left for the school run, I'd told Andrew I'd be spending the day finishing the last of the Christmas shopping for the girls and buying extra linen to accommodate Elli in the spare room when she came. But I didn't head for the shops. Firstly, I called Anil for a download on what had happened at the halo-making and then with the elf and the surprise news about Andrew's brother. 'You should have called me last night,' he'd gently scolded. 'That's what I'm here for.' He'd offered to meet up but the phone conversation was enough to calm me down and set the cravings at bay. I got in my car and headed for my appointment with Nadine. And here I am, jiggling away like the jumpy addict that I am, but trying my goddamn hardest to replace new habits for old.

When the door to Nadine's office opens, I'm up and out of my seat before she's even said my name. I need her. I need the release that the sessions provide. Her office is clean and minimal, the kind of place a Scandi Marie Kondo would love: unfussy blond-wood furniture, forest wall art and a little greenery in the form of a peace lily but nothing to distract the already cluttered mind. After the chaos of home with its array of still-unopened boxes, I usually find Nadine's office calming. Not today.

'Marianne, tell me what's going on for you right now.'

I explain to her last night—the strange encounter with Jamila, my near sobriety slip-up, the dismembered elf and the added load of my brother-in-law's family.

Nadine nods calmly, makes a few notes in her Moleskine book, then looks up.

'And the alcohol cravings? I imagine they're powerful right now.'

'You have no idea. Last night I was this close.' I bring my thumb and index finger together. 'I hate it. I must be a monster.' Something about saying the words out loud and seeing the slightest flinch in Nadine's calm countenance triggers an overwhelming wave of guilt and shame. She obviously agrees; I am a monster. I go to grab my handbag. 'I don't think I can do this today. I should go. I don't want to waste your time.'

'It's never a waste of time.' This time Nadine doesn't flinch and doesn't rush to stop me even though I'm now clutching my bag on my lap and my muscles are sprung like a cheetah ready to pounce. Instead she looks over her tortoiseshell spectacles and pushes them back on her nose. 'How about we

try? In my experience, these heightened states are when hypnotherapy is at its most powerful.' She puts down the pen. 'Let me put it this way. It doesn't take much to get an already calm person into the focused state. But if you can take the cluttered mind and make order of it, then—' She opens her palms. 'How powerful is that?'

I see the sense in what she's saying and already my *allegro* heartbeat is slackening in her calming presence. The carrot she's dangling in front of me is irresistible. If I can get into 'the zone' when my mind is chaotic with thoughts and overwhelmed with emotion, it'll be a huge confidence boost—one that's absolutely worth the risk.

'How about we begin?' She gestures to the couch and I have no hesitation in relocating to the lying position.

Nadine sits in the chair just behind my head and begins to speak in a more lyrical, lilting register. 'All right, Marianne, when you are ready and comfortable, close your eyes.'

We start with deep breaths and, beginning with the top of my head, she asks me to relax every part of my body, from jaw to fingertips to toenails. When she asks me what colour I see over my head I answer *blue* and she tells me to imagine the perfect shade of blue flowing all the way from the top of my head and all through my body and through to the ground.

'Blue relaxing you. Blue releasing you. Blue freeing you of all tension in your body. Your eyes are so wonderfully, deeply relaxed they just want to stay closed. No matter how hard you try, they will stay closed. And when you're absolutely sure your eyes don't want to open, go ahead and say the word *Blue*.'

'Blue,' I repeat without thinking.

She asks me to imagine a staircase. 'Whatever you imagine is perfect for you and I want you to use your voice to describe your perfect staircase.'

My staircase is made of oak. It's a solid staircase, wide enough to accommodate a ball gown and it peels off in two directions from a central landing.

Nadine asks me to start from the top of the staircase and take each step gently and slowly. 'With each one, you feel yourself falling further and further into relaxation. With each step, you feel a doubling of your relaxation.' She counts backwards from ten with soothing words in between to deepen the relaxation state and at this point my limbs are weighted to the couch. I couldn't move even if I wanted to. At number one, Nadine snaps her fingers and her words slow to a viscous, honey-drip *lento* pace where each syllable is its own melody.

'And now you are in your safe place. Take a look around. Breathe in the fragrances. Feel its texture. Hear its sounds. See the colours.'

I tell her about my safe place, how it's a cosy bedroom with a king-size mattress big enough for the whole family. The sounds are muted thanks to plush carpet and heavy drapes and there's a peek of sunlight at the edge of the fabric that lets me know it's a beautiful day out there.

‘You’re doing so well. Your place is so perfect and I want you to amplify and magnify that sense of safety and comfort and peace. Drink it in. Let it fill your pores, your veins, your bones. Take your time and soak up that feeling and when you’re ready for what’s next, let me know.’

I shift in the couch like I’m sinking down into that beautiful bed. ‘I’m ready.’

‘When I count down from three and click my fingers, you’re going to speak to the part of you that wants to turn to alcohol whenever you’re stressed or anxious. This part of you may look exactly like you, it may look like a devil with horns or it may look like a ball. However it appears to you is perfect and as it should be. When you’re ready, tell me what you notice about that part of you.’

‘It’s a doll. A baby doll like I had when I was a child. Her name is Claudia. But her eyes are broken. I lie her down but her eyes never close. She’s always watching, always judging and she never sleeps because her eyes are always open. She’s so exhausted. Broken. Terrified. She doesn’t work like she should. She’s so ashamed of herself. She’s such a failure. She’s supposed to look after people, give them comfort, but she can’t. She’s supposed to be a good mother. She’s me but she’s also outside of me.’

‘Perfect, Marianne. That’s perfect. I want you to repeat these words after me. My broken, ashamed doll, Claudia, thank you for being here. I want to ask you—why do you feel so frightened and ashamed?’

I repeat the words, my chest rises and lowers steadily.

Nadine speaks. ‘And what does she say?’

‘She’s frightened because she doesn’t want to feel these negative emotions. She wants to drink alcohol so she can numb her feelings but she knows that the alcohol will only end up making her feel worse, that she might do something dangerous when she’s drinking.’

‘And what would that dangerous thing be?’ croons Nadine.

From the dark edges of my mind jumps an image, unbidden, of hands turning a steering wheel. The doll, Claudia, sits on the back seat, watching, but just as quickly as the images came, they’re gone again.

‘What was that?’ I call out. ‘Come back. Come back, I need to see you.’

‘What is it, Marianne? What are you seeing?’

‘I saw something from the day of the accident. A steering wheel. And it was slipping through someone’s hands. Turning too quickly. Far too quickly.’

‘And what is it about this image makes you think it’s the day of the accident?’

‘Because I’m wearing my fuchsia blouse and I can see the old woman and the baby through the windscreen. They’re in front of the car. And, no, god, no. Stop. Stop. We’re going to hit them. Stop.’ My hands rush to my eyes and the scene is playing out like a movie behind them. The pram, the horror on the woman’s face, her scream of terror as the steering wheel slips, slips, slips like water through fingers. I can’t bear this. I can’t bear to see what I have done. I’m torn between the desperate need to open my eyes to avoid the

horror of what comes next but at the same time I need to see how this plays out. I need to see what I did. I force my hands back to my side and gulp for breath.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know if I want to see this.’

‘You are still safe, Marianne. You are in your safe place. You can watch this scene to the end and it will change nothing because it’s already happened. What you fear most has come true and yet you are still here. Still safe. Give yourself permission to stay in this moment and see it to the end. That’s what you want. Look again. What do you see?’

I toss my head and keep my eyes closed, desperate to stay in the moment, but it’s like I’ve been underwater, seeing everything through a liquid fog and now someone or something is pushing me back to the surface so I can breathe. I’m no match for their strength.

My eyes open with a gasp. An acid heat seeps into my eyes. ‘I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t stay there.’ Why wasn’t I strong enough to stay in the memory? Why do I always have to be a coward? I was so close to remembering. It’s exactly what I’ve been wanting to unlock but once again, my bravery has failed me.

‘It’s all right, Marianne. You did so well. It’s okay to feel disoriented after a sudden break from deep focus. But let’s go back to your breathing and restore the calm. Slowly in and slowly out.’

I try to focus on Nadine’s melodic tones. But instead of clearing my mind, the space allows my brain to wander back into the past, back to the real Claudia, the first real love of my life.

5

Before

Marianne

I always wanted to be a mother. Always wanted to have my own children. *Yeah, yeah*, I hear you say. *So does everyone*. And sure, it's not strange to want to be a mother. But I'm telling you (and Mum will back me on this), from an early age, I was obsessed. For my fourth birthday Mum gave me a doll—one of those ones that sips water and produces wees—and I named her Claudia. She was my baby. Wherever I went, she came too. I changed her nappy, bathed her, clothed her, even pretended to breastfeed her. I got cross when people referred to her as my doll.

Her name is Claudia and she's my baby.

'Did you think that was a bit weird?' I asked Mum once I was in my late teens and old enough to realise how strange it was for a four-year-old to breastfeed a doll for more than a year and insist on her being acknowledged as a human child.

'A little bit odd. But put it this way, I would have been more worried if you were smacking her. The feeding was sort of cute. Little boys pretend to shoot things with guns.' Her eyes had misted over. 'And then, after Jeffrey ... I didn't have the heart to stop you.'

Mum indulged my whimsies out of grief for Dad. Sometimes, in the height of really happy moments—birthdays, school concerts, visits to the zoo—I caught her looking at me and Elli with an odd, pitying expression and when I called her out on it she always apologised and said she was thinking about Dad and how much he would have loved to see us growing up. The happiness we experienced as a family of three (and as I recall, there was a lot of it) was always tinged with Mum's sadness, which frustrated me. I had few recollections of Dad—I was five years old when he died. And while I longed for a father (everyone else had one, why didn't I?) it was impossible for me to feel the absence of a specific dad.

But I had Claudia and I took her to preschool every day for a year. When

it came to starting primary school, Ellinor put her foot down. 'If you bring that thing along, I will tell everyone that you are not my sister.'

I ran to Mum in floods of tears, expecting her to tell me that Elli was wrong and it would be fine to have Claudia by my side.

But Mum took me by the shoulders. 'Sweetheart, school is for big girls, and not for babies.'

At this I cried harder. 'I'm not a baby. I'm a mother.'

'Oh, darling, no—I didn't mean you are the baby. I meant Claudia.' She looked at me gravely. 'I think it might be time for her to have a nanny while you go off to do the important work at school.'

'But who can I ask to look after her?'

'How about me? I have loads of experience with children and I've known Claudia since birth.'

'But what about when you're at work?' As a single parent, Mum's full-time job as a speech pathologist was paramount to our family's survival.

'Claudia can come. She might learn some new skills.'

Grudgingly, I agreed. Every morning, once my school bag was packed I kissed Claudia and presented her to Mum. 'Look after my baby.'

'I will,' she would say, accepting Claudia with equal solemnity.

This went on through kindergarten, right through to Year Three, at which point I realised there was a whole schoolyard of children to mother. I didn't need Claudia any more, I had real-life kids to guide to the bubblers and toilets when they needed them, to take to the office when they hurt themselves, and to bring to a teacher whose sleeve I would tug on to let them know about accidental wees. I never tired of playing 'let's pretend' with the little ones. My imagination was vivid enough to take a scenario and run with it for days and days. Around this time, I'd also discovered the piano, my other true love. I could spend hours with my fingers flitting across the ebony and ivory keys. I was a dreamy kid who was usually lost in the world of music or in make-believe happy families.

When I graduated from high school, I was torn between studying early childhood teaching and pursuing my piano career but Mum steered me gently towards taking the place I'd secured through a gruelling audition at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music.

'You have such a beautiful talent, Mazzie. It would be such a shame not to use it.'

In Sydney, I discovered a whole world of talented pianists and a love of binge drinking that helped me overcome my sense of inferiority. Quickly, I switched from the performance stream to the music education strand. Maybe I was sufficiently competent to pull off the Rachmaninov Piano Concerto No. 2, considered to be one of the most technically and emotionally challenging pieces for a pianist, but I didn't have the bravado required to do it justice. It required an emotional vulnerability that I could not show while sober. I was a squeaky wheel that required enormous lubrication to operate smoothly, especially in the presence of my prodigiously capable peers. On Friday

nights, after class, we'd go out in the city and I'd drink enough alcohol to make me forget that I was nowhere near as cool or talented as my city friends. I was desperate for a boyfriend and with enough vodka cruisers under my belt I had the confidence to approach any man in any bar. Mostly I made a beeline for tradies with their high-vis T-shirts and heavy work boots, the ones who'd just clocked off from lugging wheelbarrows around high-rises under construction in the city. None of these flings ever worked out. These were always 'pash-and-dash' scenarios, for it didn't take long for the tradie and me to realise we had no common ground at all.

But that didn't stop me from trying. After three years of weekly bouts of binge drinking, interspersed with near-complete musical immersion, I happily returned to Newcastle and went into teaching piano to kids—a perfect combination of my two loves. I played the occasional gig, but mostly supported myself by teaching in schools and out of my one-bedroom flat in Merewether, not far from the beach.

For a while, this was enough. I was in my early twenties, supporting myself financially, going out every Friday and Saturday night with old school mates to Fanny's and the Great Northern. Newcastle was one of those towns which was big enough to boast a few pubs and clubs but also small enough that you were always guaranteed of running into a familiar face wherever you went.

My tradie fixation continued but after a couple of years, I had the gnawing sense that there had to be more. The jigsaw puzzle of my life was forming but it still missed its large central pieces. A partner. Children. A family of my own, complete with two parents. It was in my destiny to become a mother. But what I couldn't find was a man who shared my vision. Oh, sure there were boys who wanted to be with me and I fell for the overtures every single time.

You're so beautiful. You're so sweet.

I'm falling for you, too, so let's get drunk and have lots of sex every Friday and Saturday night.

So fun, right? You're up for this, I know you are because you're a cool chick. Wait. You want to hang out in the daytime?

Without drinking?

I can't sleep with other women?

And you want to have babies before you're thirty? Fuck that. I'm out.

It's how it went. Every. Single. Time. I put my heart and soul into these handsome young idiots who had no intention of making any kind of commitment to me, certainly not one that involved forever, as fatherhood did. The last of these timewasters was Darren—the brickie who'd stolen my heart with ravings about my milk-chocolate eyes and beautiful, gentle soul and how he could see a future with me, one in which we sipped Bintangs by the beach in Bali. After six months, with the Bintangs well behind us and my beautiful eyes a more irregular topic of conversation, I raised the concept of us moving in together. Darren was in a share house and the appeal of

slinking past his housemates every Saturday and Sunday morning had well and truly worn off. He never wanted to stay in my flat. He called it ‘the shoebox’, which stung but was also possibly true.

Lying in bed one particular Sunday morning with the thudding base of his housemate’s Drake CD thudding through the walls, I tentatively broached the subject of moving in together. ‘You know, to have our own space. To walk around naked if we want.’

‘I walk around this place naked all the time, babe.’ Darren had yawned and snuggled closer. ‘But I don’t recommend it for you.’

‘It’s just ... we always have to come to yours, which is a bit of a hassle for me.’ As I spoke, he was frowning in a way that told me he didn’t like what he was hearing. ‘I mean, it’s fine,’ I went on. ‘No big deal to pack a toothbrush and clothes every weekend. But don’t you think it would be nicer if we could kiss each other goodnight and wake up every morning together? We could cook together. Watch whatever we want on the TV. Be as loud as we want.’

‘I don’t know, babe. What we’ve got is pretty awesome. We have our own spaces. We’re free to see who we want whenever we want. You can’t buy that kind of freedom.’

Sorry? What? The freedom to see other people? Given we’d been sleeping together every Friday and Saturday night for the past six months, I’d made the not-unreasonable assumption our relationship was exclusive.

‘Babe, I told you at the start I wasn’t looking for anything serious,’ he whined.

True, that’s exactly what he’d said but that ha ‘That bastard. That utter shithead’ hadn’t stopped me from thinking about what we might name our babies and how cute they’d be with my hazel eyes and Darren’s dusty-blond curls.

Darren wrapped his arm around my waist. ‘It’s too early for this shit. Come back to sleep.’

Burning with shame at my naïveté, I’d disentangled myself from his grasp and grabbed my knickers by the side of the bed. ‘I’ve ... I’ve just remembered I need to ... I need to be somewhere.’ My voice was holding but only just. I kept my back to him as I retrieved the clothes strewn about Darren’s messy, Lynx-drenched room.

‘Suit yourself.’ He rolled over and within ten seconds was snoring lightly.

*

‘What is it? What’s wrong?’ The first person I called was Elli, who sounded confused and slightly panicked, possibly because it was 4.38 am and the only calls at that time of day are usually life and death emergencies. But I knew she’d forgive me for causing her a few seconds of angst—she always had in the past.

Through tears and hiccups, I recounted my conversation with Darren.

‘That bastard. That utter shithead. Do you want me to kill him? Cut off

his balls?’

This was the beauty of my sister. Seven years my senior but light years ahead in confidence and common sense, I could always count on her for 100 per cent support, even when we both knew that this was a mistake I’d made many times over. But that’s the nature of unconditional love, right? No strings, no boundaries.

By the end of the conversation, I was no longer in tears and Elli had made me promise to join her for Saturday afternoon drinks to drown my sorrows. She was meeting a few colleagues in the city to celebrate the end of a big commercial litigation where the result had gone their way. After a gym workout followed by a big brekky at home, a one-hour session of love ballads at the piano and a solid power nap, I put on a knee length, white broderie anglaise dress I loved—the one that Darren said made me look like ‘an old-fashioned chick’ (honestly, the more I thought about that idiot, the more I wondered how I’d wasted six months of my life with him). At the pub, Elli told me I looked like one of the girls from *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, which I took as a compliment because I knew how much she loved the book.

The bar was heaving and Elli grabbed my hand and proceeded to thread us through the crowd and towards the corner where her firm had booked some tables.

‘Andrew, you remember my sister, Maz.’

‘Maz, nice to see you again.’ Andrew and I had met a few times over the five years in which Elli had worked at Fincher and Bignall in Newcastle’s CBD. At first, I knew him only as Elli’s boss and there was a certain level of deference and formality to their interactions. But over the years, their professional relationship had extended and softened into something that straddled that strange, liminal space between work colleague and friend. At times I wondered if the feelings went beyond the strictly professional. They were similar in so many ways—their intelligence and wit, their common sense and shared love of *Breaking Bad* (too many bodies in acid for my tastes). But Elli insisted it was nothing more than a friendly working relationship.

‘Andrew? No way. He’s my boss.’ But after she was done scrunching up her face, she added, ‘Besides, one of us would have to leave the firm.’

‘So you have thought about it then?’

‘I’m in my thirties and still single. I’ve thought about what marriage to Walter White would be like.’

‘Um. Terrifying and short-lived?’

She shrugged. ‘Each to their own.’

At the harbourside bar, with my Darren-frayed heart inspiring a ‘fuck it’ attitude, I’d pulled Andrew in for a quick kiss on the cheek. ‘Nice to see you, too.’

‘Oh. Ah. Yes. Right. Hello.’ Andrew’s neck instantly pinkened in a surprisingly sweet way. Elli had moved off to greet the rest of her younger colleagues but I stayed by Andrew’s side because he was the only one I knew.

‘Can I get you a drink?’ he asked.

‘I’d love that. A Pimm’s and lemonade, thanks.’

‘Pimm’s, eh?’ His eyebrows shot up. ‘This lot tell me it’s a posh old lady’s drink. Rib me senseless about it.’

‘That might be true but it’s also delicious.’

‘Exactly.’

When he returned with two of them, it did strike me as a slightly unusual choice for a man—all my former boyfriends had strictly drunk beer (to warm up early in the evening) and tequila shots (to get completely hammered later).

On this occasion, our drinks came complete with a mint leaf and a halved strawberry, and as Andrew negotiated his way around the glass, the strawberry tumbled down his chin, over his pristine white shirt and into his lap. ‘Gosh. Ah. Sorry.’ He grabbed a serviette and started wiping at the pink stain. ‘God, how embarrassing. First I order the world’s least masculine drink and second I have the temerity to spill it all over myself. Way to go, Andrew. Smooth as hell.’ He gave an apologetic smile and kept dabbing. Something in my heart splintered. He was normally so stitched-up and proper. Always clean-shaven and perfectly coiffed with a short-back-and-sides haircut and neatly pressed shirts.

‘Here, let me help.’ I hopped off the stool and ordered a sparkling mineral water from the bar. ‘Do you mind?’ Without waiting for an answer, I dunked a serviette into the water, tucked two fingers under his shirt, just below the top button and dabbed the material.

‘Oh. Ah. Thank you. You don’t have to, but thank you.’ He kept his gaze to the side so that our eyes didn’t meet but when he spoke, I felt his breath on my mouth.

‘There. All done.’ I stepped back to double-check.

‘Right. Okay. You’re a magician.’

I shrugged. ‘I spend a fair bit of my life with kids. Nothing to it.’

‘Are you in childcare?’

‘I always thought I would be, but no I’m a piano teacher.’

‘Seriously? That’s impressive.’

‘Not really. Most of them are barely beyond “Chopsticks”. Seems a slight waste of three years at the Con.’

His eyes widened. ‘You went to the Con? Now I’m really impressed. I could never teach music to children.’

‘Why’s that? Don’t like kids?’

His expression softened. ‘Oh, no. I love kids. But when it comes to playing a musical instrument, I have two left hands—sorry to ruin the metaphor there. Mastering an instrument and teaching it to kids, that’s special.’ He tipped his drink in my direction and I felt myself blooming under his gaze.

The rest of the night was a bit of a blur. I’d always been of the belief that I’m at my flirty best when drunk. I was funnier. I had more to say. I was a better dancer. Andrew kept buying the drinks, and I kept inhaling them. At

one point I offered to pay, especially after I noticed he'd switched to mineral water, but Andrew insisted on shouting me the entire night.

‘You saved my \$140 shirt. I owe you.’

Every so often, Elli popped over to check I was okay. ‘You sure you don’t want to come and join the young ones? There are a couple of nice guys your age.’

‘Actually, I’m quite happy here.’

‘With Andrew?’ Her expression was doubtful. ‘I can’t imagine what the two of you have in common.’

I held up my glass. ‘Pimm’s and lemonade, for one.’

She laughed. ‘Right, you both enjoy the most disgusting, daggy drink in the world.’

‘It’s absolutely delicious, and the sixth one tastes just as good as the first.’ I slurped the dregs and absorbed Elli’s slight frown. ‘You’re not mad, are you?’

‘Of course not. You deserve some fun—and it’s fine, provided you don’t tell him any embarrassing stories from our childhood.’

‘Like the time you forced me to run away with you to the local park even though I was barely out of nappies.’

‘You wanted to come.’

‘You told me there’d be lollies and chips.’

‘Well, you survived. I would never have let anything happen to you. You’re my favourite sister.’ She cupped my cheek with her hand. ‘All I want is for you to be happy.’

I held up the Pimm’s. ‘And thanks to this, I am.’

*

I don’t remember much more about that night, except that Andrew and I talked for hours. Don’t ask me what we discussed because I have no idea. But I remember that it was easy. The alcohol had lubricated my tongue and the key image I recall from the evening is Andrew with his head tipped back in laughter. He found everything I said hilarious and I tell you there’s no drug quite as addictive as the validating high of making another person laugh.

Dusk morphed into night, hours passed like minutes, and then it was bright lights on, music off and bar staff dumping glasses into dishwashers with the kind of carelessness that said it was time to go.

Except I didn’t want to. Flanked by Andrew and Elli, I stumbled out of the bar and into the inky night.

‘C’mon. Just one more. There must be some bar still open in this stupid city.’

‘Maz, it’s time to go home. Let’s find a cab.’ Elli let go of me to step onto the street and look for a taxi. I draped my free arm around Andrew’s shoulder so that we were now in a slow-dance kind of clinch.

‘You’re not boring like my sister. You’ll keep me company, won’t you?’

My legs were jelly and I was conscious of Andrew's body against mine.

'Shit. There's a crowd on the corner that's taking all the cabs. You guys wait here and I'll go flag one down.' Elli hurried down the street while I stayed in a clinch with her boss.

A passing car tooted and the driver leant out the window. 'Get a room, ya dickheads.'

'Hm. Someone's a bit cross with us. Whatever.' I turned my attention back to Andrew and squeezed his bicep. I don't know what I was thinking. I was never quite this forward with men. I had such old-fashioned notions of romance—that it had to be the man who did the asking and the chasing. To this day, the way I behaved with Andrew still makes me cringe. For years he teased me about it and both of us have often wondered aloud how differently things might have panned out had I not been so uninhibited that night. But none of that crossed my mind. I wasn't thinking of anything except how nice Andrew felt in my arms and how, with eight glasses of Pimm's and lemonade under my belt, he was so much better looking.

'With all your fancy business shirts and your wool trousers, you wouldn't know you have a good body under there. But you do. You definitely have a body,' I said, squeezing again.

'I do have a body, and both it and my brain are saying it's time to go home.'

I playfully punched his shoulder. 'Oh, you're no fun either.' I gently shoved him away and crossed my arms in mock disapproval.

'Oi, you two. Over here. Found one.' Further up, on the opposite side of the road, Elli stood beside a white cab and waved her arms.

'And here comes the pumpkin.' I stumbled forward and stepped out onto the road without bothering to check for oncoming traffic.

'Maz, no!' Was that Elli or Andrew shouting at me? Either way, the whole thing happened like a slow-motion gasp. There was a continuous loud horn, a flash of brilliant white light that made me shield my eyes and I was falling, falling ... until I wasn't. The grip on me was tight, urgent and fast as a whip. One moment, all I could see were black wheels spinning towards me. The next, everything was a blur as I was flung at whiplash speed from out of the oncoming car's path.

'Are you okay? Are you hurt?' Andrew held me by the waist. I was limp in his arms, my back pressed into his chest, and he spoke into my ear. In the distance, Elli screamed and started bolting towards us.

'Next time, watch where you're going. Idiot,' yelled the driver.

'How about you watch where you're going?' screamed back Elli and the souped-up car disappeared in a screech of tyres and thick petrol fumes.

'Tell me where it hurts.' Andrew held me tighter.

'I'm okay. I'm okay.' But I wasn't. My legs wouldn't function and blood roared in my ears. I tried to process what had just happened, how I'd been a matter of millimetres from being seriously hurt, maybe killed.

Elli's eyes were wild with fear. 'Oh, god, are you all right?'

‘She seems fine. Possibly in shock.’ Andrew hooked his shoulder under mine. ‘Let’s get her home.’

‘I’ll get the taxi.’ Elli raced off while Andrew and I limped slowly behind.

‘Thank you.’ My voice was a whisper. ‘If you hadn’t been there ...’

‘Please don’t, it’s nothing. Anyone else would have done the same.’

For some reason an image popped into my mind of Darren’s sculpted and tattooed arms. He wouldn’t have done it. He wouldn’t have risked his own life for mine.

‘You saved me,’ I said through a choked voice. ‘You saved my life.’

Andrew looked at me with tenderness. ‘I would always protect you.’

6

Christmas Day

Doctor Callie Kang pauses at the foot of the hospital bed. Her eyes flick from machine to machine. The patient is stable for the moment. Eyes taped shut. A bruise of purple, yellow and green has bloomed, algae-like, across half of his face and a particularly nasty gash (taped and stitched) lies where his cheekbone ordinarily would have sat before it was smashed to pieces. The CT scan will tell them more about the brain injury. But at least his heart is beating. A steady rhythm of 64 beats per minute.

One of Callie's favourite nurses, Yvonne, comes to her side. 'I've seen some bad falls in my time, but this one ...' She shakes her head. 'He must have collected every step along the way.'

'Christmas, hey.' In hospital, the day is always frantic thanks to a potent combination of skeleton staff plus an adult population fuelled by alcohol and kids determined to put their new scooters/bikes/rollerskates through their paces.

'Why do we do it to ourselves?' Yvonne goes to the head of the bed. For a split second, she closes her eyes and touches the swathe of bandages around the patient's skull in a way that reminds Callie of a priest anointing the head of one of his flock, or a mum laying hands on a sick child. 'You poor fella.'

Callie gives the moment some space before she speaks again. 'Seeing the kids tonight?'

Yvonne's children are older than Callie but even when they are sixty years old she suspects they will still be 'the kids' because Yvonne will never stop seeing herself as their loving protector. Lucky buggers.

'Finishing up here at five and the kids are coming at six for the full roast.'

'How are you going to pull that off?'

'With my magic mummy hands.' Yvonne holds up her fingers and waggles them. 'And Michael knows how to switch on an oven.'

'The kids don't host?' Even Callie knows how to roast a slab of meat. Not hard but it does take time and some mental energy, neither of which Yvonne will have after a twelve-hour shift in intensive care.

‘That’s a good question, m’dear.’ Yvonne rearranges the blankets where they’ve slipped from the patient’s shoulders. ‘They’ve offered, so I can’t blame them.’ She pauses, one hand on the patient’s shoulder but her eyes on Callie. ‘It would sort of feel like giving in.’

‘To what? Good sense and rationality?’

‘Oh, you are cheeky.’ Yvonne laughs. ‘And you might be right but it’s more ... more like you have your baby and it’s literally part of you but then the whole idea of raising a child is to make them completely independent. It’s so gratifying when you know they can stand on their own two feet but it’s also like losing a limb.’ She smiles. ‘I hope you experience it one day.’

‘Hmm. You make it sound so great.’

‘Stop it. You’d be a fantastic parent.’

Maybe. But now? Callie and Rachael have already spoken about having a kid, in a theoretical sense. Rachael wants them (one day) and she wants to carry the child. Callie is open to being a parent but she has no desire to be pregnant. She hasn’t studied for ten years just to give it all up and let her male colleagues leapfrog over her.

‘I can barely keep a goldfish alive,’ says Callie with a sigh.

‘But you’re very good at keeping humans alive.’ Yvonne’s gaze goes back to the patient. ‘Lucky for this one.’

Yvonne moves to the nurses’ station for patient handover while Callie takes a seat near the staircase guy. Her legs need a rest. Her brain needs a holiday. Four hours till the end of her shift which means that if the news is bad on this patient she’ll be the one to deliver it to the family. Fuck. On Christmas Day. But maybe there is no family. Who knows? It’s a vague but faint (and macabre) hope. There was no one with him when the paramedics did the handover in ED. No wife (or husband). Is it possible that this bloke spent his Christmas Day alone? Sounds like bliss to Callie.

She hasn’t told Rachael this, but she volunteered for the Christmas shift this year. She has no kids, all her family is interstate, she has no faith to speak of and the penalty rates are insane. By working this one day, she can fund a hotel in the city for New Year’s Eve and while her girlfriend was a little pissy at the idea of her missing Christmas, she’d come round very quickly when Callie outlined her plans for spending the money she’d earn.

‘Okay, babe. You go off and save some lives while I die a slow death with my family.’

‘Your mum and dad are cool as fuck.’

The spill of laughter from Rachael’s mouth was like a dam bursting its banks—uncontained and powerful. Callie fucking loved her girlfriend’s laugh.

‘Rob and Denise? Cool? Hahahaha. They’re not cool, they’re just bewildered. They literally do not know what to say so they just keep saying how much they love me.’ Callie is the first girlfriend Rachael ever brought home and it still triggered heat in Callie’s eyes when she thought of how much effort they’d gone to in welcoming her into the family. Rob in his good

suit. Denise wheeling out the fancy crockery.

‘Isn’t that what matters?’ In the kitchen of their flat, Callie had wrapped her arms around her girlfriend. ‘That they love you? What else can they say?’ She puts on a deep, male voice. ‘So, my daughter, exactly what is a strap-on?’

‘Ha. My dad would rather die than mention sex.’ She was still grinning. ‘Speaking of parents—how go the evil angels?’

That was her nickname for Callie’s mum and dad—the most loving, do-gooding and lesbian-hating people on earth. They’d actually invited her for Christmas last year, but when she enquired if Rachael was included, her mum hung up in her ear and later sent her a text saying that if Callie insisted on continuing to live an unchristian life, then she had no business crossing their threshold. No problem there. People could be so fucked up. She sees plenty of that at the hospital. She also sees amazing acts of grace and dignity.

Which will this guy before her, teetering between life and death, receive?

*

The touch on her shoulder causes her entire body to react. Has she fallen asleep? Possibly. But only for a minute or two. Still, highly embarrassing. Very unprofessional.

‘Sorry, uh. One of the nurses showed me in. I just wanted to see how he’s doing. She said you’re the doctor. I didn’t mean to scare you.’

‘Oh, no. You didn’t. I was just ... Ah. Deep in thought. You’re a relative?’

The woman pauses, eyes locked on the patient. ‘Mm-hmm.’ Half of her face is obscured by her surgical mask but there’s no hiding the bruise smudged around her eye socket.

‘Were you there when the accident happened?’

‘No, not really. I didn’t see anything.’

‘I don’t mean to pry but was alcohol involved? We didn’t get many details from the paramedics.’

‘I don’t know. He wasn’t drunk, if that’s what you’re asking.’

‘Like I said, I didn’t mean anything by it, but it might help us treat his injuries more effectively.’

‘How bad is he?’

‘We know he’s fractured his cheekbone and skull. We’re still waiting on the CT scan to assess any bleeding on the brain.’

‘Will he ... will he live?’

Callie hates this question. ‘We’re doing everything we can to keep him comfortable. He’s stable for the moment. We’ll know more when we get those results.’

The woman begins to weep quietly. ‘Oh my god, it’s such a mess. Such a mess.’

Callie passes tissues and guides her into a chair next to the bed. ‘Here. Take a minute. I know this is a lot to take in. Would you like a glass of water?’

‘Yes, please.’

She pours from the jug but the woman pauses with the cup in her hand. She can’t drink through the mask.

‘It’s fine,’ Callie assures her. ‘For a minute or two.’

The woman, still focused on the bed, draws down her mask to reveal another bruise on her chin and a small cut to her jaw. There are grazes on her neck, small scratches that look like they were made by fingernails. Callie’s internal alarm sounds. It’s not the first time she’s dealt with DV in the ICU and it absolutely won’t be the last. Fucking men.

The woman holds the cup with two hands and sips timidly, her eyes never leaving the patient. To get in her eyeline, Callie perches up on the bed.

‘Are you okay?’ she says softly. ‘Did he do something to you?’

The woman does not speak and neither does Callie, because she has learnt that the longer a silence goes on, the more likely a person will fill it with the truth.

‘Yes,’ she whispers. ‘Yes. He did do something to me.’

7

8 December

Dominic

The warehouse is humming today, as you'd expect, seventeen days out from Christmas. The whiteboard near the entry reads:

Hampers packed so far: 1385

Hamper target: 2485

Dominic takes a box and heads to the table where a small brigade of women in high-vis vests are nattering away as they pack an array of dry goods into boxes, emblazoned with the charity's logo.

'Mind if I join you, ladies?' His request is met with the usual round of overenthusiastic yeses and please dos and *so nice to see a young man doing his bit*. Not that forty-two actually qualifies as 'young' but it's all relative. In this crew he's a baby which isn't an unpleasant feeling at all. After a couple of small-talky questions about the weather and the number of boxes still to pack, the women leave him alone and he settles into the peaceful work of dropping muesli bars and pasta into boxes and listening to the ladies chat. Today, the medical ailment du jour is a torn meniscus, which is a relief because last week's was hysterectomies-gone-wrong. The next topic might be a dissection of the Prime Minister's performance at the G20, or the sale on fluffy slippers that Aldi's having in the middle aisle. This, Dominic has learnt after a month of volunteering, is how women converse. Nothing off-limits. No segue required. No topic too big or too small. It's as wild and free-flowing as a river, which is comforting because it reminds him of his mother and he feels close to her in a way that cannot be repeated anywhere else, not even when he's standing by her graveside.

'Margie, are you all right there? Mind your back now.' One of the voices rises over the other and Dominic follows the woman's gaze to the dry goods stacked behind him where a shortish blonde lady is on tiptoes, trying to retrieve a large box of cereal.

'Here, let me.' Dominic leaps to his feet and neatly takes the box off the

shelf.

‘Oh, thank you, love,’ the woman huffs and bends over to catch her breath.

When anyone asks why he started volunteering, he says it’s because he wanted to ‘give back’ to the community. He’s a single man with no kids, a solid business as an optometrist that gives him a bit of flexibility to take an afternoon off each week. If he can’t afford the time to volunteer, then who can? But the truth is somewhat more complex, as truths often are. He wouldn’t admit this to anyone else because it sounds a bit pathetic, but the fact is he’s lonely. Maybe he’s even a bit depressed. When a discerning regular client picked up on his air of melancholy, she suggested he engage in a charitable activity outside of the home. As he looked into the veiny-red water balloon of her retina, a coil of fear squeezed in his gut. ‘Like, join a men’s shed? I barely know a hammer from a hacksaw.’ Male-only environments still managed to provoke in him an awful sense that his stutter was only a breath away from permanently returning.

‘You don’t have to own a tool belt to be a volunteer,’ she replied with a sympathetic smile from behind the phoropter, the piece of kit that made patients look like metal machine-headed aliens. ‘You have two hands, two legs and a brain. There’s bound to be something you can do.’

A few days later when he was mindlessly scrolling social media, he’d stopped on a photo of his sister and his brother-in-law standing proudly in front of a tinsel-strangled pine tree and looking like all their Christmases had come at once. God, they looked happy—and they deserved it, after everything. Lou in an ocean-blue, flowy dress and Tao relaxed and tanned in khakis. Dominic’s finger hovered over the ‘like’ button. Could he press it? Could he make a comment? *Looking good, Cheng family. Have you been naughty or nice?*

No, no comment. No reaction. Nothing that brought attention to himself and this window he’d retained into his sister’s life—a window that she might easily slam shut if she knew he was still peeking in. He kept scrolling as an ache started up in his chest and his heart pumped out a mantra.

You’re alone, brother. You’re all alone.

He’d thumbed down and down until the heat was gone from his eyes. Finally, like a poker machine coming to rest on its winning symbols, the screen stopped on a sponsored post.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!

Newcastle charity the Flame Foundation has been inundated with requests for food and gifts this Christmas and we need your help to ensure they’re fulfilled.

All you need is a few spare hours and a can-do attitude. No special skills or experience required.

Let’s make this a special Christmas for everyone!

Dominic didn’t believe in God or destinies but this Facebook post gave him a momentary wobble. It was a sign. He was meant to do this. Even the idea of helping out had lessened the chest ache and given way to something

like a bud of hope. Without further thought, he filled in the online registration form and was genuinely pleased when an email dropped into his inbox two days later, inviting him for a shift at the Mayfield warehouse on Thursday afternoon.

He turned up with every intention of this being a genuinely selfless act. They asked if he'd prefer to cook or to pack hampers and one look at the kitchen told him the answer. It was full of tattooed men with bushy beards and buzz cuts, wielding huge carving knives—'We get lots of people on community orders here,' the volunteer co-ordinator had whispered in his ear. In contrast, the hamper-packing room was filled with the scent of rose perfume and the soft sounds of women in orthopaedic-approved sneakers.

'You're a lifesaver,' wheezes the shortish blonde woman as she rights herself and looks up at Dominic with gratitude in her sparkly blue eyes.

A small cramp forks through his gut that he tries to ignore. He knows those blue eyes and they're still twinkling back at him with no semblance of recognition.

'Oh, it's nothing.' He makes an effort to keep his voice casual. 'Should I put these on the table?'

'If you wouldn't mind.'

She follows him and he's aware of her eyes boring into his back. Will she recognise him? Will the synapses connect? It only took him half a second to put two and two together, but then again, she'd been far more prominent in the courtroom than he had. Twinkly eyes had sat down the front for the sentencing, right behind the defence counsel. On one side of her was a woman, maybe early forties, that Dominic knew to be the older daughter, Ellinor, and on the other side was the husband, Andrew. He knew their names because he'd read their witness statements—both had been present on the day of the accident. On the other side of the aisle were Lou and Tao, who sat behind the prosecutor in her curly white wig and an efficient-looking solicitor who leant back every so often to speak with them in low tones.

Dominic stayed up the back. Lou had made it clear he wasn't welcome in her vicinity and he respected her wishes, he really did, but he had to see this horrendous episode played out to its conclusion. It was his duty, however triggering and awful it might be. He slipped into the last row where he stayed next to scribbling journalists and random stickybeaks until the judge pronounced the sentence. 'You may take the offender into custody.'

Someone cried out. Someone gasped. Dominic couldn't tell who made the sounds but the spontaneous outbreak of human emotion was shocking in this environment of such procedure and control. He felt sick.

'All rise,' the clerk announced and there was a collective shuffle as everyone in the court rose as one.

Dominic slumped back to his seat. So that was it? All over in less than three hours? He made eye contact with the female journalist beside him, packing her notebook and phone into a satchel.

'That's it then?' he asked. 'They take her to jail straight away?'

‘Yep. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred bucks.’ The reporter smiled. ‘She’ll be processed which takes a while and she’ll probably spend a night in the watch house.’ She cocked her head. ‘But she would have known it was coming, with the guilty plea and all. Are you a friend or relative?’

‘N-no. Nothing like that.’ The last thing he wanted was to be interviewed on camera as Lou had been.

At the bar table, the guilty woman (Dominic couldn’t bring himself to even think her name. It was just easier that way) was in a four-way hug with her mother, sister and husband. On the other side, Tao had his arm around Lou as her shoulders heaved in syncopated rhythm. What a tortured, awful scene. Two families ruined by one moment of madness.

Dominic slipped out of the court and past the waiting array of cameras and microphones. The sun beat down on his head as he hurried down the street and he hoped, hard, that no one was following.

And no one was.

*

Blue-eyes offers a warm and wrinkled hand for him to shake. ‘I’m Margaret. Margaret Hardie.’ Okay, so it’s beyond doubt. Definitely her.

‘I’m Dom. D-D-Dominic.’ He thrusts out his hand, praying she doesn’t notice the quiver in his fingers. ‘N-n-n-nice to m-m-m-eet you.’ His cheeks warm with embarrassment. Damn his stupid stutter. It doesn’t often rear its head these days but in moments of high tension or emotion, it bucks up unhelpfully to compound the stress of the situation. He’s a grown man. The fact he has not quite conquered the impediment shames him. The funny looks people give him as if to say *What are you? A child?*

‘You know, Dominic, I used to be a speech pathologist. Did you have a parent with a stutter?’

For a moment, he’s taken aback. No one ever actually names his condition which in some ways makes it worse. Elephants in a room and all that. But Margaret observes him with friendly curiosity.

‘M-my mum.’

‘I see,’ she nods. ‘And did you get an awful time at school? Most of my young clients were horribly bullied. Made my blood boil.’ Her fingers curl to a fist at her side. ‘Children can be so cruel. And adults,’ she adds. ‘They’re not immune.’

The things he could tell her. The schoolyard taunting. His high school nickname—Double Ds, because he could never say Dominic without a couple of tries. His head getting flushed in a toilet to rinse his mouth. Awful stuff. At the time, his parents told him to ignore it. *Be the bigger man. Turn the other cheek, son. They’ll get theirs.*

Dominic did as instructed. These were his parents. They loved him more than anyone in the world so of course they knew best. *They’ll get sick of it in the end*, they always said. *They’ll find someone else to pick on.*

Somewhat true. The bullies found others but they also never let up on Dominic and now he wonders if it was the right advice at all. Maybe if he'd stood up for himself, thrown a few punches? Maybe that would have stopped them. His sister thought so. Despite being two years younger, she sat him down for a talking-to. 'You need to fight back, or they'll never stop. Mum and Dad have no idea.'

'They were kids once, they must have some idea. Mum had a stutter.'

'All adults forget. Trust me.'

But the idea of punching another human and using his knuckles to bore into soft flesh made Dominic feel nauseous. He tried, once, and swung so hard that he did a complete 360 and fell over. You can imagine how that helped the bullying. All he could do was wait, attend his speech therapy, and work hard on his exercises. By the time he had it mostly licked, high school was over and university was big enough that he could escape any man he perceived to exude that kind of toxic bullying energy. And it was always men.

Margaret pats his arm. 'I'm sorry for what you went through.'

The stutter is only the half of it, he thinks. You'd be really sorry if you actually knew me.

With the fuggy air of childhood trauma cleared, Margaret moves easily back into small-talk mode. The weather (already too hot) and the shops (already too busy).

'My daughter is flying in from London this week.'

'Oh. That's nice.' She must be talking about Ellinor. 'Do you have other children?'

'Yes, another daughter, Marianne.'

'Marianne and Ellinor. Like the book,' he says. 'The Austen one. *Sense and Sensibility*.'

Her eyes widen like a pool into which one could dive. 'Yes. You're a fan?'

'Oh. Absolutely.' Not a raging fan but enough of one to realise when he was reading the witness statements that the accused was Marianne and her sister was Ellinor and it all rang a bell until he twigged that they were the names of the two sisters in the book he'd studied for his final school exams more than twenty years ago. And now, here, the mother—Margaret, just like the book as well. How curious.

'It's silly really but I always loved Austen and resolved that if I had two girls, I'd name them after the Dashwoods.' Margaret brings her hands together and now those blue eyes are glistening like aquamarine and Dominic cannot be sure whether it's from pride or sorrow because he knows a bit about the heartache she's been through. No mother has a child thinking she will one day grow up to be a drunk who mows down and kills two people with her car. No, he is not angry with Margaret. Her daughter, on the other hand ... Dominic wouldn't mind a word or two with her, but that won't be possible while she's still locked up in prison.

'What do they think, your daughters?'

Margaret clasps his arm. 'Well, you know it's the funniest thing. 'Have you heard of manifestation?'

'Like when you visualise something and it comes true?'

'That's it.' She speaks again with delighted surprise as if praising a child for reading their first word. 'It's like I manifested these girls' personalities into being. Ellinor is my strong, sensible elder child and Marianne ... well ...' A cloud comes across her clear-sky eyes. 'She's a bit more flighty, if you know what I mean.'

I know exactly.

'Hmm ...' says Dominic. 'I think I do.'

There's an awkward silence in which he has no idea where to take the conversation. Does he tell her the truth? Does he reveal that he's intimate with her family in ways he never wished? He's not one to cause a scene and has no desire to cause one in front of the other volunteers whom he assumes know all about Margaret and her daughter's awful crime—the case received widespread publicity after all—but have chosen to forgive and forget.

Indeed, Dominic doesn't hold Margaret responsible for her daughter's actions and he doesn't want to make a scene here at the charity's warehouse. Doesn't seem quite the spirit of Christmas to bring up crimes and misdemeanours when they're doing good work for the poor. Still, he can't help feeling aggrieved by the fact that Margaret gets to continue this conversation in blissful ignorance while he carries the mental equivalent of a UN debate in his head. So he asks a cheeky question, one designed to hurt just a little.

'Will you be seeing them both for Christmas?'

She won't. Marianne still has eight months left to serve on her sentence.

But Margaret's mouth erupts into a Luna Park smile. 'As a matter of fact I will. Marianne is hosting.' She brings her hands together. 'So we'll all be together again.'

'Sorry, what? You're seeing both of them?' The questions slip out without him having any chance to filter the tone which is more aggressive than intended.

A brief cloud scuds over Margaret's expression before a full sunshine beam returns. 'Aren't I a lucky lady? All of us together again.' She cocks her head. 'And what about you, Dominic? What are your Christmas plans?'

There is a buzz in his ears, but it's just the one thought, folding over itself again and again, like stairs that disappear at the top of an escalator. *Marianne is out of jail? Marianne is out of jail? Marianne is out of jail?*

How? And why hadn't he been informed about her early release? Surely a victim's family ought to be told.

And maybe they had been. It's feasible Lou withheld it because that was another way of inflicting pain.

Margaret waits for his answer.

'Well ... um. Nothing really. No plans yet.' He's so thrown by the revelation that he can manage nothing but the truth.

‘But you have family?’

‘Not really.’

‘Oh.’ Margaret’s face is a crushed tissue. ‘That’s so sad.’

He sees her brain ticking over, sees what she’s about to say and he doesn’t want her to go there because it will reinforce to him that she is a kind woman and he is being a bit of a prick by not disclosing the terrible history that binds them.

‘Oh, no. I’m sure I’ll find someone. I’ve got a friend who usually invites me. Just haven’t touched base yet, that’s all.’

Lies. All lies.

‘That’s good to hear. No one should be alone at Christmas.’

And yet he will be. Dominic, who has broken no law and committed no crime, will be all alone.

8

8 December

Margaret

This man is lying to me, thinks Margaret as she puts another box of muesli bars into a hamper. *But why?*

She knows him. Of course she knows him. He's the son and he's also a terrible actor, unlike Margaret who's had a lifetime of practice at covering her true feelings. Look at her here in the warehouse on a sunny Thursday afternoon in early December, nonchalantly packing muesli bars into hamper boxes and chatting about Christmas as if she hasn't just come face to face with a ghost.

Not that Dominic is a ghost, as such. He's flesh and blood and has a pleasant face—kind eyes and a lovely shock of brown wavy hair—nothing ghostly about any of that. But look at him, that haunted look on his face when he thinks Margaret isn't watching. And that stutter—another dead giveaway. Her sympathy for him on that front is genuine; it's a terrible affliction that she'd never wish on any child. What could be worse than being unable to express yourself clearly and efficiently? There'd been nothing more rewarding in her career than treating a child with a stutter. Not only was she helping to fix a functional problem, the boost in self-esteem was enormous. But the 'cure' wasn't permanent. Kids with a stutter would never be top poker players; the condition often came back at the least convenient of times. Look at Dominic, scuttling off down the aisle to fetch another box of chocolates and flushed with ... what is it exactly? Embarrassment? Shame? Stress?

No doubt the last thing he expected in volunteering at the charity was to run into her.

Or is it?

Maybe it's fury she's seeing creep up his neck? It's certainly a possibility and until she understands why he's really here she'll keep up the friendly chitchat while giving away nothing to suggest that she knows exactly who he

is. In all honesty, she may not have realised if it weren't for that completely stricken look on his face when they first locked eyes over the cereal boxes. Why would a man, a stranger, recoil from her with such horror? Yes, she is getting old and society generally has a distaste for the elderly. But this was different. It was the shocked expression of stumbling upon a dead body or witnessing a terrible car accident. It was also fleeting, a blip that lasted no longer than half a second but it was not a thing you could ignore. The expression said, *I know something terrible about you*—but what was that something? There were several ‘somethings’ of which Margaret was not proud. Which one did this man know? The fact he regained composure so quickly told her he did not want to share. It also told her that he did not expect her to remember him. He underestimated her and this was not surprising. Underestimation came with age. Once you turned seventy, people expected you to be daffy and hopeless. Most of the time, it enraged her. On this occasion, it helped. Dominic assumed she did not remember.

But Margaret Hardie never forgets a face. Ever.

It's the son. The thought had popped into her head, as nimble as a cat chasing a bird. *It's the son. So what is he doing here?*

Margie has a theory that all volunteers (not just those at the charity) donate their time not because they want to ‘give back’ to the community but because they feel guilty. No, let’s be precise—they are guilty. They’re atoning for something and the degree of ‘payment’ required exists on a spectrum. It might be for something specific. Some ‘volunteers’ are actual criminals for whom community service is part of the punishment, but for others it’s a general sense of guilt at being better off than someone else. A sense that the good fortune is undeserved, which it mostly is. She meets a lot of Catholics at the charity—some of them lapsed, like her, and others still fervently practising—which proves her point. They are good and decent people but seemingly haunted by the gruesome death of a young man some two thousand years ago. That Jesus must have had quite the charisma to convince everyone around him that he was the son of God and born of a virgin—it’s quite bonkers when you think about it, which Margaret did, long and hard, in the months after Jeffrey died. Would her husband be in heaven or hell? Heaven, most likely, because he was a good and decent man. But Margie? Hell, when the time came. She had done so much wrong. So much that was unforgivable. What was the point in being part of a religion that offered no hope of reunion in the afterlife with her husband? She stopped going to church but the guilt never left and here she is, decades on, still atoning at the charity for her sins.

Margie and Dominic work side by side in companionable silence while she contemplates the odds of them randomly meeting in this way. Newcastle isn’t large but it isn’t tiny—a population of around three hundred thousand. So what are the chances of two people with a very strange historical connection coincidentally finding themselves working together at the same charity?

Extremely remote, that's what.

He'd kept a very low profile at the court. She'd only glimpsed him after the sentencing when everyone was too distraught to notice anything much. Dominic's sister, the baby's mother, had sat up the front with her husband, weeping and dabbing her eyes. Her sideways glances at the defence were like lashes of a whip—fierce and brutal. She exuded rage, and fair enough too. Margie would have been the same. In the victim impact statement, the woman, Louisa, had made a passing reference to a brother but it had been fleeting and unmemorable. Still, it had stuck in Margie's brain. Where was he? Why didn't he sit up front with his sister? At that point, she had swivelled around and spotted a man crying silently in the back row. It had to be him. He bore the same walnut-coloured hair as his sister—hers was also wavy. Margaret was about to nudge Ellinor to point him out but the judge asked Marianne to stand for her sentence and Margie found her eyes pulled forward.

She didn't see Dominic again, not that she was really looking. Her daughter was going to prison. There was nothing else in her mind. It was shocking and unbelievable. Sweet, loving Marianne. Her daughter's life would never be the same, neither would that of her husband, children, sister and mother. The ripples spread far and wide. As if seeing her child behind bars wasn't difficult enough, the loss of decades-long friendships really hurt Margie. Friends with whom she'd experienced the best and worst of life—marriages, babies, divorce, illness, financial hardship—abandoned her cold. Not all of them, of course. There were three loyal mates who reached out after the sentencing—two men who'd been colleagues and a girlfriend from school who'd moved further up the coast just before the accident—but Margie was essentially isolated. In a larger city, the accident might have gone slightly more under the radar but because of Newcastle's relatively small size and the devastation of there being a child victim, it was big news. Even those who didn't listen to radio or engage with the media soon heard about it through word of mouth.

Moving to Sydney after serving her jail term was the right decision for Marianne but it was another wrench for Margie, who no longer had such ready access to her gorgeous granddaughters nor her lovely son-in-law.

The packing of cereal, chocolates and biscuits into boxes continues and Margie decides to test Dominic, see if she can elicit another reaction. First, she mentions Ellinor coming home from London. Then *he* asks about her other daughter, Marianne. Hmm. Interesting. When she tells him about her hosting Christmas lunch she scans his face and again there's that stricken look. One of horror. But why? Did he not know that she was out of prison? She mentally clicks her fingers. That's it. He doesn't know she got out early. That must be the reason behind the beads of sweat on his top lip and the slight twitch in his eye. The effort of appearing unruffled is taking its toll. She asks him about Christmas Day—her standard question at this time of year, especially at the charity where her antenna is up for anyone who has

nowhere to go—he lies and says he has no family. That thing about seeing a friend is clearly a lie, too. He can't meet her gaze.

'No one should be alone at Christmas,' she says. Bloody Christmas. The stress of it all, for women mostly. Mothers in particular. It's many years since Margie has crept around a darkened house on Christmas Eve and deposited gift-laden pillowcases at the foot of a sleeping child's bed but she remembers the pressure, the angst. She sees it all in Maz, god bless. Anyone with two eyes can see how she's tying herself in knots to make it perfect for her little girls when the truth is there is no such thing. Margaret knows all about that. But it's more than the usual Christmas stress. There's a slightly manic look in her daughter's eye that worries Margie. She's like a doll that's malfunctioned. Not quite there. And maybe that's to be expected after her experience in prison, but maybe it's also something that can be addressed. She'll speak to Andrew. Brainstorm ways of making Christmas slightly more bearable for her daughter, so she doesn't tip over into a total breakdown. Andrew will listen to her, good man that he is. A saint really, given all he's had to endure.

'So, Dominic, what made you want to volunteer?' she asks.

'Oh, you know,' he shrugs but his gaze drops. 'To give back and all that.'

Another lie.

'What about you?' he asks.

'The same, I suppose.' She pauses. 'Actually that's not true. I'm here because I'm lonely. I'm recently retired, no husband, two daughters who don't live nearby.' She shrugs. 'I came here for companionship, I suppose. To meet people.'

Dominic's eyes widen. He was not expecting such frankness—not from a virtual stranger. 'You know what, Margaret? I'm a bit the same.' He gives a shy smile but there's a slight downturn at the corner which detracts from its sincerity. 'I'm glad we met.'

She still has questions, of course, still unsure of his real reason for being there but an idea is forming in her mind, an idea that sprouts like a bud of hope.

Maybe you can help, she thinks. Maybe this is meant to be.

9

9 December

Marianne

I'm halfway up a ladder on our back deck, juggling a string of lights in one hand and a Rudolph statue in the other when my phone vibrates in my pocket. I can't ignore it. When you have two school-aged children you don't ignore the phone, not even when Christmas is bearing down fast and you still have a house to decorate and gifts and food to buy. Oh, and did I mention my new parole officer is coming by today? That too. With the lights strung around my neck, I check the screen.

Favourite Sister.

Odd. We spoke only a few hours ago when she was packing and wanted the latest on the weather in Sydney, whether she'd need a jumper, what the girls might like as gifts. She also knew I had a full day planned and needed every spare minute to get the house ready.

‘How goes the Griswold makeover?’

The reference gives me a smile and a shiver. Watching Chevy Chase butcher his family's Christmas was an annual Hardie tradition but the Griswold disaster is exactly the opposite of what I'm trying to create for my family.

‘Slow. Nothing fits.’ In our old house in Newcastle, I'd bought decorations to suit the home's dimensions and spaces. Nothing is quite right in this new home, an older-style house where, because we back onto bushland, there are more cobwebs than I'm used to. Ah, well. Beggars can't be choosers. Sydney's more expensive than Newcastle and Andrew got the best he could with what we had and the bush provides a beautiful view.

‘Oh, Maz,’ Elli sighs. ‘You're putting too much pressure on yourself. It doesn't have to be perfect. The girls don't expect that.’ Here's a thing about my sister: she can basically read my mind, read everything I'm going through and tell me why my thinking is wrongheaded. Sometimes annoying but also quite useful.

‘I know they don’t expect it but they deserve it.’

‘Last year, Mum said they barely noticed you were gone. It wasn’t that bad.’

I press the phone to my ear. ‘Is that supposed to make me feel better, because I’m not sure it’s working.’

She sighs again. ‘You know what I mean. Andrew and Mum made it completely festive for them. It wasn’t like you’d died. You were always coming back and they knew that.’

Silence.

‘God, I’m sorry, Maz. I didn’t mean it like that—’

‘No, no. I know what you meant.’ I brush imaginary dust from my shoulder and the tinsel drops to the floor. Elli isn’t thinking. She didn’t mean to find my soft underbelly and stomp on it. It’s not her fault. She isn’t the one who stuffed everything up. ‘It’s fine. But I really do need to get a move on with these decorations so I might hang up now if—’

‘No, wait. I did have something to tell you. I just got off the phone with Mum and I wanted to give you some warning.’ Elli pauses. ‘She’s flagged the idea of bringing someone to Christmas.’

‘What? Who?’ I groan and the ladder shudders beneath me.

‘She doesn’t know yet. But it’ll be some random, you know what she’s like.’

‘This Christmas? Really? What’s she thinking?’

‘What she always thinks: that this is a time of family and togetherness and that no one should be alone on Christmas Day.’

I clamber off the ladder, drop Rudolph and the lights to the deck and flop into the outdoor couch next to where Ned is sprawled in a deep sleep. I shouldn’t be surprised. Mum has always had a habit of inviting random strangers to Christmas, like the year she brought her Chilean Zumba instructor and the time she invited her recently divorced hairdresser or the year when her butcher came along (not the worst result—the turkey was much cheaper). Still, Elli’s words prickle at me. She’s right of course. Mum’s right, too. No one should be alone on Christmas Day and while they’re strangers to us, she usually has some previous association which guarantees the invitees aren’t too weird. Normally, Elli and I grumble but go along with it. But this one is different. It’s my reunion Christmas and it has to be magical for the girls, and for Andrew. And the honest truth is, it’s just not the same when there’s a stranger at the table. No one is quite themselves. We’re on our best behaviour, lest the random stranger go back and report to—to who? I’m not quite sure since normally these are very lonely people who have no one in their lives.

I stroke Ned’s belly for comfort. ‘What if he’s like Jonathan? He terrified the girls. I can’t take that kind of risk.’

Jonathan was Mum’s gardener—a mild-mannered recent widower, an ace with the whipper snipper, and (unbeknown to Mum) also a dab hand with the whiskey bottle. By 1 pm, before lunch had even been served, he was

comatose on the couch, having told Mum in a drunken slur that she was his favourite client and he'd happily attend to her overgrown bushes on a more regular basis. In fairness, my girls were more intrigued than terrified. 'Remember that time I put five marshmallows in my mouth and tried to speak? That's how this man sounds.' Harper had peered at the snoring Jonathan on the sofa. 'He won't choke, will he?'

But here's the really shameful part. I only remember that day because the girls have talked about it quite often. I was possibly more drunk than Jonathan. I just knew how to hide it better.

Down the phone line, I hear Elli snapping her fingers. 'Let's make it a dry Christmas. No alcohol at all. I should have thought of it before. Then, there'll be no chance of having a drunk Christmas orphan. It just makes it easier ...' She trails off.

'Thank you, Elli, but no. Andrew and I have talked about it. We want this Christmas to be as normal as possible.'

My throat has thickened with guilt. Will it always be like this—my family having to think I need special exceptions?

'Suit yourself,' says Elli. 'You can always change your mind.'

I twirl the rope of fairy lights around my finger. 'Hey, did I tell you that I remembered something from the accident?'

'What? No. Was this with the hypnotherapist?'

I take her through what I recalled of the moments before the crash, looking through the windscreen at the old woman and the pram she was wheeling, the horror of knowing I was going to hit them.

'And that's it? Nothing else?' There's an odd tone to Elli's voice like she's relieved I didn't remember more.

'That's it.' Since the appointment I've spent hours lost in my head, trying to return to that calm state to conjure more of the day and the events leading up to the crash. But nothing further has come. Ned shifts and rolls to his back, still fast asleep. If only I could achieve that kind of deep relaxation.

'Did you tell Andrew?'

'He doesn't know about the hypnotherapist. I don't want him to worry.'

A pause. 'Probably a good idea.'

A few seconds of silence pass in which I again mentally assess my decision to keep this secret from Andrew. If Elli thinks it's a good idea, maybe it is? After all, she knows him almost as well as I do.

Sensing that Elli wants to know more, I speak. 'You know who really featured heavily? My doll, Claudia.'

My sister snorts. 'Oh, god, I haven't thought about that doll in years. You were so weird about her.'

'I really was, you know. So desperate to mother someone ...' I wonder about this, sometimes, my urgent maternal urges. For so many years I passed it off as a need to give love. Now I can't help thinking that perhaps it spoke to some deep, unmet need in me to *be* loved. So needy. Such a flawed plan. As anyone who's ever had children knows, being a parent is almost 100 per

cent giving and 0 per cent taking. Kids are the most self-absorbed beings in the world—and they have to be, I get that. A child should only have concern for their own fears, needs, worries; they cannot be expected to take on another's, it wouldn't be healthy. Parenting is a role for fully formed, capable adults, adults like Elli, who would make the most amazing mother. But time is not on her side. She needs to get a move on if she's to have any hope. I know she wants them, but she doesn't want to say it out loud because that's always been her way, putting everyone else's needs (mine, mostly) ahead of her own. I'll never be able to completely repay Elli for the love and loyalty she's shown to me but I can make a start by encouraging her to put herself first for once.

‘Speaking of babies, though.’ It’s an effort to keep my voice casual. ‘Have you thought any more about—’

‘Maz, please. Not now. I told you, I’ve made the appointment and we’ll talk about it more when I’m home.’

My sister rings off and I look down into my lap to where I’ve curled the fairy lights cord around my little finger, feeling a sense of failure. Why can I never seem to get things quite right? It’s not for lack of trying. It’s as though I have a set of keys to myself and whichever one I try is never quite the right fit; like I’m always trying to be someone I’m not. No wonder Elli doesn’t want to confide in me—I’m not a substantial person. Why would anyone seek counsel from a recovering alcoholic?

In my lap, the tip of my finger has turned purple. The blood supply completely cut off. For a second, I think about leaving it that way, just to enjoy the throbbing pain of it. At what point would it start to die? And this thought, too: *You deserve to lose something.*

For a second I follow the thought to its conclusion—doctors, hospital, surgery, bandages. All that time, all that attention.

With a sense of regret, I loosen the noose around my finger and watch as my flesh returns to its normal colour. I’ve got a house to decorate. I’ve got a magical Christmas to deliver to my two girls. I don’t have time for an injury. I don’t have time to kill something and watch it die.

I’ve done that before. Never again.

When I get up from the couch, familiar strains of the Rach 2 waft over the deck, along with the smell of burning tobacco. Andrew says he’s going to have a word with George about the cigarettes—the passive smoke is no good for the girls—but I’ve asked him to leave it. Two reasons. One, I like the smell and maybe that’s because I associate it with alcohol. Two, the man seems to have so few pleasures in his life, how could we demand he deny himself one of them? Not that he would. He strikes me as a stubborn man, perhaps as stubborn as my husband.

‘You can really play that tune?’ George plods over his deck, slow as a tortoise, as the music swells in a frenzy of notes and a chaos of chords. ‘It’s bloody mental.’

I let out a laugh that eases the pressure in my chest of being reminded

who I once was, the music I could once play. 'Not now. Not for years.'

He grunts. 'You're talking to a man who can't play a kazoo so it's pretty bloody impressive.'

'Well, thank you, George. How's tricks with you this arvo?'

He gives me one of his gnarled old smiles. I like making him smile. Like I said, life can't be easy at his age and stage. How does he manage all on his own in that crumbling tree house? I wouldn't last five seconds.

'That's my line, Miss Marianne. How's tricks with you?' He limps to the railing with his walker and flips down the lid of the stool to sit. As far as neighbours go, he's actually ideal. Keeps to himself and, except for a cigarette or two each day, he's rarely on his back deck, which looks directly onto ours. I might have freaked out a little when he saw me with the wine bottle the other night, but I know he's not the type to say anything to anyone about it.

'Oh, you know. Just getting ready for Christmas.' I gesture to the lights. 'Trying to deliver the magic.'

'You're a good mum, Marianne. Those kids are bloody lucky.'

'Not really.' George doesn't know the truth. How could he?

'They bloody are. I see you, Miss Marianne.' He taps his nose. 'I know a good one when I see it.'

I feel myself flushing. He really has no idea. 'What about you, George? What do you do for Christmas? Where do you go?'

'Me?' He looks surprised at her question. 'Nowhere. Just here on me Pat Malone. I pump the Handel on the stereo, few whiskeys, that'll do me.'

I pause because it's like Mum's voice is in my ear, telling me what to say. 'George, would you like to have lunch with us? It's a family gathering, nothing too fancy, but you'd be very welcome.' I hear Elli's voice in my head, telling me this is a terrible idea. *You hate having strangers at the Christmas table.*

But my sister isn't here and asking George seems right.

'Tah, Marianne. Tah muchly, but your husband is not my biggest fan.'

'You mean the business about the trees? I asked him about that. He says he loves them. Would never want them cut down, that's what he said to me.'

'Did he now? Well, that's not what I recall and thank you all the same but I'll stick to meself on Christmas. All that bloody forced happiness. Rellies that hate each other. Inedible turkey. Dry bloody fruit cake. Cheap plonk. Enough to make you want to off someone when you think about it.'

I don't want to think about it. That's not what Christmas in my home will be like this year. Perhaps it's just as well that George doesn't want to come, not with that kind of spirit. I have to believe the day will be perfect. 'Well, George, if you change your mind ...' I let the words trail off into the warmth of the day, the wide expanse of bush. I suspect it's not the traditions of Christmas that George hates, it's the sense of loneliness, the reminder of what he's lost. I hope he changes his mind.

10

9 December

Ellinor

She pulls the front door closed behind her and double-checks the lock before lugging her suitcase down three flights of stairs to the footpath outside her apartment where she waits in the cold for her Uber.

Fuck it's freezing. Wasn't her second London winter meant to be easier than the first? It sure as hell hasn't worked out that way. Bones never get used to biting cold. All you can do is buy a bigger, thicker coat and some leather gloves and accept an almost permanent state of hat-hair.

She stamps her rapidly numbing feet to get some feeling back into them. Last time she looked the Uber was a minute away but when she checks the app again, the little ant on the screen hasn't moved. Traffic. That's another thing she hates about this city.

Above her, lights flick on in the building and at least half of the flats have Christmas decorations and fairy lights strewn across large, black-framed windows. Here's one positive: London knows how to do Christmas. Last year, she visited every set of spectacular Christmas lights she could find—Oxford Street, Regent Street, Southbank. *How Maz would love this*, had been her overriding thought as she stood before the fireplace in a traditional, dark-wood and sticky-floored pub, warm mulled wine in hand. She had rotisserie herself in front of a roaring fire but the coldness of thinking about her sister alone and incarcerated would not leave her bones.

One year on, she's still cold and now it's the thought of actually seeing her sister for the first time in eighteen months that's giving her chills. Maz is remembering things. How long will it be till she remembers everything? There's a worry.

A toot from the Uber rouses her from thought and in her haste to get to the car and out of the cold she dislodges her handbag from her shoulder and the contents sprawl over the footpath—her passport, phone, printed copies of her tickets and the brochures featuring chubby babies and toothpaste-

commercial mothers. She feels bad for having shut down the IVF conversation with Maz but her sister has always been so naturally maternal, she can't possibly understand the deep insecurities Elli feels about the prospect of motherhood, particularly solo motherhood.

Her smiley driver, Ravi, runs to help collect her things. 'God, it's cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey,' he says, hands in the gutter.

The phrase is so unexpected that it draws a bark-laugh from deep in Elli's gut. 'God, I haven't heard that one in a while. My mum used to say it was colder than a mother-in-law's kiss.' An interesting saying given Margaret rarely saw her Manchester-born-and-bred mother-in-law, especially not after Dad died.

Ravi roars with laughter. 'I like this. I will tell my mother-in-law. She hates Australians. But she is a miserable old cow.'

Inside the car is toasty. Ravi's Rav4 blasts hot air through its vents and Elli begins her usual disrobing. Scarf and beanie first, gloves next, coat unbuttoned to the waist.

'I keep the car at Delhi temperature year-round, I hope you don't mind,' he says.

'Not at all.'

'So, where are we off to today?'

'Going home.'

He whistles. 'Halfway round the world where the sun always shines.'

'Something like that,' she murmurs as Ravi navigates the streets of Hackney, past one of her favourite landmarks—Clapton Square, with its quintessentially English garden and rows of Georgian terraces. She sits back and enjoys the cosiness, lets the guilt of not taking the train dissolve. This is nice. Ravi is good company. She has a thirty-two-hour journey ahead of her so why make it any worse by being forced to sniff someone's armpit for forty minutes on a packed tube?

'It's a long way to go for family.' Ravi swings them on to Dalston Lane, another chocolate-box London street. 'You must love them very much.'

'Oh ... yes.' Why does she hesitate? She does love her family. God, how she's missed her sister. Her mum, too and those cheeky-monkey nieces.

But.

The baggage that comes with everything she's left behind is heavy and unwieldy. The hurt, the trauma, the guilt.

And the lies.

Ravi chuckles away at her underwhelming response. 'I haven't been home to Delhi in ten years. I keep telling my mother to come here but she thinks the cold would kill her. And the bad food.'

'I've had some wonderful Indian food here.' Every second day, it seems one of her colleagues is suggesting they order in a curry while they work through dinner. And gosh, they are good. Comforting, spicy—the perfect antidote to endless legal briefs.

'But the curry here does not taste like home. Nothing tastes like home.'

He says this wistfully and she understands that he is not only talking about food. 'But when you do go back, you think it's going to be wonderful and ...'

'All it does is remind you of why you left in the first place.' Not that Elli needs a reminder. The things she wanted to leave behind in Australia are still with her, as if she packed them in her London suitcase. Could going home help her to sort it, once and for all? Or will it only make things worse?

Ravi takes his eyes off the road to meet her gaze. 'Exactly. That's it.'

For the rest of the trip, they are mostly silent, caught up in their own worlds of discomfort and remembering. By the time Elli reaches the check-in counter, the butterflies are so frantic in her belly, she's contemplating turning back altogether. She could blame work, say an emergency came up that's forced them back to the office for Christmas. But can she really do that to Maz? Her sister's heart is so set on making this the perfect celebration and Elli's absence would throw a major spanner in the works. After everything Maz has been through, she doesn't deserve yet another body blow. And yet. And yet. Elli has this awful sense of foreboding—that the Christmas is doomed, with or without her presence.

If she does proceed with the trip, her options are these:

1. Tell the truth to Maz about what really happened on the day of the accident and beg forgiveness for her role in causing it.

2. Say nothing and hope her sister doesn't remember, understanding that if she does regain the memories, she may never forgive Elli for perpetuating the lie.

Christ, what a shitshow. She hands over her passport and ticket with a slight tremble in her fingers. By the time she's settled in her business-class seat, her stomach is roiling with nerves and anticipation—and not only about Maz. Every time she gets on a flight, she thinks of the planes that flew into the twin towers on September 11. The terror of those last few minutes.

'Good afternoon, Miss Hardie, welcome aboard. My name is Sherry and I'll be looking after you. How are we today?' The flight attendant speaks with a broad Australian accent and gets to her haunches. Just those two things are enough to generate heat in Elli's eyes. She has missed home, not just her family, but this—the friendly informality. And there's something nurturing in this woman's manner, like she could be a nurse. Someone you can confide in.

'Uh. A little nervous actually. I'm not the best flier.'

'You're perfectly safe with us. But anything I can do to make you feel better, just sing out. Some people find a chat with the captain helps? I can get him down here, no trouble.' She motions towards the front end of the plane.

'Oh, no. No. You don't need to do that.' Elli's not one for a fuss. She hates a fuss.

'Right you are, then. But how about a glass of Australian sparkling? That's my favourite nerve-settler.' She speaks with a wink and a smile. 'Perfect.'

By the time the plane taxis down the runway and presses her into the seat, Elli's gulped one glass and has a fresh pour in place. Soon, she'll take a

temazepam, as she does most nights to quiet her thoughts, and the whole thing will become one big blurry dream.

11

9 December

Marianne

The text message comes as I'm putting the final touches to the Christmas decorations and feeling slightly more in control now that the tree is up and all the tinsel is in the right spot. The girls will get such a fabulous surprise when they get home from school—I can't wait to see the smiles on their faces. I've made sure to hold back a few decorations so they can put the finishing touches to the tree and feel they've had a role in it all.

Hi Marianne, so great to meet you at the halo-making! Hope yours fits better than mine. Luna says it feels like Jesus's crown of thorns! Anyway, I know you mentioned that you're not teaching piano at the moment but I'm wondering if you'd make a little exception? We're desperate. Luna is refusing to go to her class with Mr Price (he smells, apparently) and we're one week away from the end of year concert. Her 'Ode to Joy' sounds more like 'Ode to Misery'. If there's any way you could come and give her a lesson, we'd be so grateful. Happy to pay, of course. Jamila

I clutch the phone to my chest and the dread slides down my throat with *glissando*-like ease. There's no way I can teach Luna. Jamila's already onto me, I'm sure of it—my face sits in her deep subconscious and the more time I spend with her, the more I'll push myself to the surface. Plus there's the fact that I don't have a working with children check and I seriously doubt my capacity to get one. What if she asks for it? If I were looking for a private music teacher, it's one of the first things I'd request.

Then again, how can I say no? What will Jamila think if I refuse? What will she say to the other parents? School-gate gossip travels fast and it won't take long for the story to spread of how the new parent refused to help another mother in need. Maybe there'll be repercussions for the girls? At this age, it's the parents who control a child's social life. Will anyone want to invite Harper or Paige for play dates or parties if their mum is known as a rude and unhelpful upstart?

I can feel my stress levels rising and I go to the kitchen, unsure of why but certain the reason will come to me. I open the cupboard with the wine glasses and quickly close it again. Can I call Anil? He'll be at work and I'm seeing him tomorrow at the meeting. Surely I can hold off until then.

The doorbell rings and the sound is like an elastic band flicking my wrist. Quentin's early. The liquid dread in my stomach sets into concrete. I quickly scrape my hair back into a ponytail as I go to the front door, ruing the fact I've prioritised the decorations over my own appearance. Why didn't I shower first, decorate second? I want so badly to make a good first impression on my corrections officer—and here I am, a flustered mess.

'Quentin, hello, it's nice to meet you.' I open the door and plaster on the biggest smile I can manage.

'Hello, Marianne.' His handshake is dry and cool and his eyes rove over my slightly dishevelled appearance: unwashed hair, tracksuit pants and a small coffee stain on my T-shirt. He, on the other hand, is in a perfectly ironed toothpaste-white shirt, with pressed trousers and black dress shoes. Brylcreemed strands of hair cover a nearly bald head and in his left hand he carries a briefcase. He is everything I imagined him to be based on our few phone conversations, in which he'd been abrupt to the point of rudeness.

'Please, come in.' I stand aside from the door then lead him towards the kitchen. I'd planned to have a pot of tea and a batch of freshly baked biscuits ready to go but the bench is empty. Tea bags and Arnott's Assorted will have to do. 'I'm so sorry, you caught me a little by surprise. I thought our appointment was for 2 pm.'

The clock on the oven reads 11.05 am. If only Quentin had kept to the schedule, I would have had everything ready to go.

'I think you'll find, Marianne, that under the conditions of your parole, I'm quite free to arrive at any time I please.'

Then why had he made the appointment for 2? I watch him unclasp his briefcase, an inscrutable look on his face with just the hint of a smug smile.

Oh. He *wanted* to catch me off guard. I swallow my inclination to retort. This is the man who holds my destiny in his hands. If he gets any inkling that I'm not following my parole conditions, I could end up back in prison and there's no way that's going to happen. 'I'm sorry, I didn't know.' I pull out two mugs from the cupboard. 'Cup of tea?'

'No, thank you.' He produces a notebook and clicks a black biro to produce the nib. 'So you've been residing here for how long?'

'Eight weeks now. Still unpacking, you know. But I managed to find the box with the Christmas decorations.' I speak with a cheery voice, hoping he might notice the copious strands of tinsel strewn about the place.

He doesn't look up. 'And who else resides here?'

'Just my husband, Andrew, and the two girls.' He scribbles away. 'Their names are Harper and Paige, if you need them.'

'I don't.' He looks up. 'Any alcohol in the house?'

'Not that I know of.'

His gaze narrows. ‘Not that you *know* of?’

‘My husband has made a Christmas cake so there might be brandy hidden somewhere but I don’t know where it is.’

‘You don’t know or you don’t want to show me?’

‘I don’t know. You could call and ask him if you like?’ I hold out my phone as a peace offering.

‘I’ll take his phone number, thank you.’

I read out the digits and Quentin carefully writes them down. ‘Attending your meetings?’

‘Every week. I’ve got one tomorrow, in fact. My sponsor is wonderful.’

Quentin doesn’t acknowledge the answer. ‘You’ve got the alcohol interlock device fitted on the car?’

‘Yes. My husband has the car today and he’s in Newcastle for work. I’ve got the certificates to prove installation.’

‘I’d like to see them.’

‘Of course.’ I hurry to the study, relieved to have a few moments to collect myself and take some deep breaths. Crouching by the cabinet, I do the grounding exercises we were taught in prison to lessen our anxieties in stressful situations. I notice the beige swirl of the older-style carpet, the wallpaper that’s peeling in one corner, the swathes of green bushland out the window and the missing paling in the fence between our place and George’s. After a few moments of focus, my breath is more under control and my pulse is back to *moderato*—slightly elevated but manageable.

I pad back into the kitchen to discover Quentin opening and closing cupboard doors. The panic returns instantly. What is he doing? What right does he have to go through our things?

I clear my throat. ‘If you’re looking for something in particular, maybe I can help?’

Quentin doesn’t look surprised or embarrassed and I take it from his reaction that this is standard practice for home visits. ‘No, it’s fine. Just checking.’

You arsehole, I think. *You have no right to snoop through our things*. But maybe he does. I’ll have to check with Andrew tonight and see exactly what the parole conditions entail.

Quentin goes back to his notebook. ‘Any holidays planned for Christmas?’

Right, so he’s gone from snooping through cupboards to making chitchat about holidays? The change throws me. The question implies I should be doing something. ‘Oh, maybe. I’d love to take the girls to Queensland at some stage, do the theme parks.’

Quentin looks at me over his spectacles. ‘You can’t leave the state of New South Wales without permission. You need to read your parole conditions.’

Bastard. Trick question. My cheeks give up the effort of smiling. ‘It was just an idea. We haven’t booked anything.’

‘Get the permission before you book is my advice.’ He scrawls some more. ‘Any work plans? Returning to employment?’ He removes the glasses to stare

at me and the directness of the gaze is almost unbearable. Does he know about the text message from Jamila? How can he? My phone is sitting on the bench within arm's distance ...

Stop it, you're being paranoid, says my inner voice of reason. The phone has a thumbprint lock. He's asking because he's a pernickety man with a power complex who wants to dot every i and cross every t and know exactly what I'm up to at every minute of the day. I'm not going to tell him about the message. I don't even know if I'm going to teach the lesson and if I so much as float the concept, it'll raise a whole new raft of questions that I don't want to answer. I just want the man out of here.

'Uh, no. I'm pretty busy with the kids, Christmas and all.'

'So what do you actually do all day? Sit around and play piano?' He looks with disdain around the messy kitchen, then his eyes go to the piano in the living room. I haven't played it since I got home and it's been sitting in the corner like a stern grandparent, old and foreboding. It's a beautiful Bechstein in a rosewood French polish that Mum bought me for my twelfth birthday when I was starting to show promise as a musician. I don't know how she afforded it as a single working parent but it's probably the most precious thing I own. For weeks now, Andrew's been hinting at me to play. The removalist nearly had a hernia trying to move it and one of the first things my husband did in our new home was to summon a piano tuner—but I haven't so much as laid a finger on the ivories and I'm not sure what's stopping me. Perhaps it's because I know it will give me pleasure and a distraction that I'm not sure I deserve.

'Like I said, the kids keep me busy and we've still quite a few boxes to unpack.'

'Right, then,' he says, unconvinced. But he closes his notebook. 'That's all I need for today. Make sure you stay in touch and let me know if any of your circumstances change.'

My urge to get Quentin out of the house is powerful and it takes enormous will to walk calmly to the door. When he stops in the hallway to examine a photograph of Andrew and me on the wall (the nail was already there when we moved in, it's not like we've gotten around to hanging photos just yet) it takes energy to stop myself from groaning. In the picture, we're standing on top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge in grey boilersuits and smiling like our faces might break. Our hands are flung out like we own the city but if you look closely my left hand is angled to face the camera.

'You climbed the Harbour Bridge,' Quentin says, stating the obvious. 'My wife and I did it for our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. What a view,' he muses. 'I'd always wanted to do it, a bit obsessed with bridges if you can believe it.'

I absolutely can, but Quentin's love of massive steel structures is now why I'm inwardly cheering.

'Oh, how interesting. My husband's a bit of a bridge nut, too.' Not true, but what the hell. Anything to connect with Quentin and it's a lie that's

unlikely to be exposed. But finally, he's given me a glimpse of the person beneath the dour corrections office exterior and this is all I need to get this man onside so he doesn't make life a living hell. 'It's where he proposed.'

'He did? Really? That's so nice. Wish I'd have had the chance to do that.' He does a quarter turn, both hands on the briefcase handle. 'You know what? Maybe I do have time for that tea after all. I'd like to hear more.'

12

Before

Marianne

Falling in love with Andrew was as easy and as subconscious as breathing. I didn't even know it was happening until, one day, after an incredible date in which he'd flown me by seaplane to a gorgeous little restaurant on the Hawkesbury River, he took me in his arms.

'I love you,' he whispered.

'I love you, too.' The words came out of me instinctively and as soon as I'd said them, I knew it to be true. It hadn't been love at first sight or even a mad, passionate romance. It was quieter, more meaningful than that. At our first drinks date conversation flowed like a stream. There were no awkward moments, no breaks in conversation. Even at the end there wasn't that strange moment where you can't work out if you're going to kiss or hug or shake hands. Or if someone's going to invite the other back home.

Andrew made it easy.

He locked eyes with mine, he took my hand, then put his other hand over the top so that my fingers were enclosed in a kind of embrace. My skin broke out in goosebumps. There was an intensity and an intent that I'd never experienced, like he wanted to capture my soul, more than my body. For our second date we went to the moonlight cinema and dodged the over-flying bats as the setting sun lit the sky on fire; we ate our body weight in cheeses and dips, laughing ourselves silly over the most stupid lines from *Top Gun*. Honestly, if he'd asked me to go home with him I would have—in a heartbeat. On our fifth date, we went down to Sydney, took the ferry to Manly and ate fish and chips on the beach. This time he kissed me on the mouth—a kiss that tasted of salt and vinegar—and just as it was deepening into tongues and longing he pulled back leaving both of us breathless.

'I'm sorry.' His forehead had wrinkled, his cheeks flushed. 'Got a bit carried away there.'

I pulled him back in so that our foreheads touched. 'I liked it.'

The opening was there, again, for him to ask me back to his place. Instead, he encircled me in his arms and pressed my head to his chest so that I could hear his heartbeat. He wanted me—I could hear it in the rapid-fire *allegro* beat—so why wasn’t he asking me to come home with him?

I asked Elli what it all meant.

‘Yep, okay, so I am not the one to talk to about this. Andrew is my boss and the idea of you two ...’ She shivered. ‘Let’s just say you should never be put in a position where you have to visualise your sister and your boss naked in a room together. Ask one of your friends.’

‘But they don’t know him like you do. What’s he waiting for? It’s been five dates. Most men would have tried it on at least by the third.’

Elli sighed. ‘Knowing Andrew, I suspect sex is more than just a bodily connection. Respect isn’t a buzzword to him; it is him.’ She sipped her green smoothie and winced. ‘God, I can’t even believe I’m talking about him like this. But I guess he wants to be sure there’s reciprocal feeling and emotion before you jump in the sack together. Maybe you need to worry more about whether you have the feelings for Andrew that he has for you.’

Warmth flooded my chest. ‘Really? Does he talk about me?’

‘No, because that would be inappropriate.’ She sipped again. ‘But he’s different at work. Lighter. Happier. Quicker to smile and joke. Slightly distracted. That’s what you’ve done to him.’ She delivered the words in a factual manner.

‘You sound like you’re not sure if it’s a good or a bad thing.’

Elli shrugged. ‘Obviously it’s good for you and him.’

‘But not for you?’

‘I’m not a monster. I want you both to be happy.’

‘But you’re still worried about what might happen if it doesn’t work out?’

‘Not really.’

‘Then what? Why are you acting so strangely?’

‘I don’t want to be the middleman between the two of you.’ She paused. ‘Just ... see where it goes. When the moment is right, it’ll happen.’

So I did. I stopped counting the numbers of dates without sex and concentrated on enjoying them. By this time we’d fallen into a habit of going back to Andrew’s after most dates—not to sleep together, but to keep the conversation going. A couple of times our evenings together had gone so late that we’d both fallen asleep where we lay on the couch. Once or twice we’d moved sleepily into Andrew’s bed but only to sleep more comfortably. In that respect the seaplane date was no different. We went back to Andrew’s because we didn’t want to be apart and yet because of those three words, something had shifted. I knew with every cell in my body that I wanted to be with this man forever and he felt the same. It was no longer about sex at all, it was about wanting to be in every part of each other’s life. Later that night when we fell into bed I wasn’t even conscious of who undressed whom. There was a unity and synergy to our actions. We moved as one. By then I already knew the contours of his body, the smell of his sheets, the feel of his

stubble against my skin. There was no awkwardness in our first lovemaking. It was natural and wonderful. In the past I'd thought of sex only as a source of pleasure, procreation and a means of tethering a man to me, but with Andrew it was more like an expression of love and a coming together that made perfect sense.

Afterward, as we lay together skin to skin, he stroked my arm. 'I want every day for the rest of our lives to be just like this.'

'I'm not sure our bank balances could cope with daily seaplane sojourns,' I joked and rolled onto my side, my back to his chest so that I could feel the entire length of his body against mine.

'I just mean you, here, all the time. Going to sleep together. Waking together. Eating together. Doing all of life.'

'I want that, too,' I murmured and snuggled myself more closely against him.

'What would you say to marrying me?'

My body pinged but I tried to suppress the reaction. This couldn't be a serious proposal. 'I think it's a bit late today.'

He laughed and kissed me lightly on the neck. 'You know what I mean.'

'I would say that I can't wait to be your wife and make a family of our own, together.' When I closed my eyes, I could already see it: the two of us at the park, me carrying a baby on my hip and Andrew chasing a preschooler on a scooter. Two was the right number for us. From my experience in teaching, I knew I didn't want to live in a home where children outnumbered parents. But neither did we want our child to be lonely. Two would be perfect. I would take some maternity leave and Andrew had already volunteered that he'd take extended paternity leave. He'd always carried a strong desire to be an equal parent, not like his own father, Frank, who had always prioritised his police career over the boys and left their mum to do all the parenting. 'I want to be a dad who shows love by being there and doing things with them.' When Andrew talked in this way about fatherhood, my heart swelled, too large to breathe. This was my person. Our lives would be perfect.

Ellinor didn't want to hear about it.

'Ew. No. Not listening to you talking about sex with Andrew.' She'd covered her ears. 'Lalalalalala. Not listening.'

'I'm not talking about that. I'm telling you that he sort of asked me to marry him.'

She uncovered her ears. 'What? You've been together for four and a half months.'

'I thought you were the one who told me to stop counting.'

'I meant stop counting the dates, not the—oh. Doesn't matter.' She stilled. 'What did you say?'

'I said I'd like to be married to him.'

'You'd like it? I think the usual answer to a proposal is yes or no.'

'It wasn't exactly a proposal.'

‘Ah. I see. More of a hypothetical question?’ Elli seemed to relax at this. ‘Andrew’s always posing them at work. His way of thinking out loud. Doesn’t always amount to action, you know.’

Elli’s words jarred. I knew she was only being honest and trying to help me manage my expectations. But couldn’t she be a little more excited for me?

‘I’m not trying to burst your post-coital balloon. But Andrew likes to mull things over. He’s too smart to rush into anything that would cause people to question his judgement or yours. By any objective measure, four months is too fast. You’re only twenty-five and he’s a man, which means he has virtually no biological clock to speak of.’ She put her hand on my arm. ‘Take your time. Get to the other side of the honeymoon phase and see if you still like each other. Then, think about a ring. You probably haven’t even had your first fight yet, right?’

We hadn’t but it wasn’t because I was holding my tongue, it was because Andrew behaved in a way that was beyond reproach. We shared values and lifestyles and interests and I’d fooled myself into believing it was possible we would never fight at all.

‘You need to have at least a few knock-down battles before you can even think about getting engaged because lord knows you’ll have plenty once you’re married. You need to know that you can disagree without it ending the relationship.’

Everything Elli said made sense. I walked away from the conversation with my feet planted more firmly on the ground—and the stability felt good. That was my sister’s knack: she brought me back down to earth in a way that was stabilising rather than crushing.

One week later, Andrew and I climbed the Sydney Harbour Bridge in celebration of my twenty-sixth birthday. At the summit, with Sydney Harbour laid out beneath us like a blue velvet carpet, he got down on one knee.

Briefly, I thought about what my sister might say. Her caution. Her wisdom. Her concern for me.

Then I said yes.

13

9 December

Margaret

Margie and Andrew stand side by side at the basin. They stare at the tap and wait. Sure enough, after a few seconds it produces a big, fat drop of water that splashes down with a disproportionately loud splat.

‘I know it’s nothing much.’ Margie clasps her hands. ‘And I feel sorry dragging you all the way here for something as silly as a leaky tap.’

‘Nonsense. I was nearby anyway. And after all you’ve done for us—’

‘Nothing that any other mother or grandmother wouldn’t do in the same situation.’

‘We will always be deeply grateful. Maz and I.’ He frowns at the tap. ‘I’m no expert plumber but I’m happy to have a crack if you’d like? Give me a sec and I’ll grab the toolbox.’

When he leaves the bathroom, a faint aroma of his aftershave lingers in the room. Margie sighs. Jeffrey used to wear a scent just like it and the smell is enough to produce a pang of yearning for her husband and a great big stab of guilt. Just over thirty years on and she still misses him desperately, still blames herself. Were he here, he would be the one to fix the leaking tap that’s been keeping her awake at night.

Margie isn’t used to this new home. At night when she visits the bathroom her fingers still feather the wall for ages before locating the light switch. When it comes to getting back to sleep, it’s impossible. She’d lived in her previous home for more than forty years, a period so lengthy that the home’s soundtrack had become mere white noise. Here in the dark hours of night it’s like being in the audience of a contemporary sonata—all strange banging and clanging, the odd possum scuffle and prowling tomcat thrown in for dramatic climax. She thinks of the lives going on about her; occasionally through the walls she hears muffled bumps and thumps—people fighting or making love? Then a few nights ago, the dripping tap started up. By day it was barely noticeable but by night when her ears are attuned to the most

minor of sounds the drip had taken on an echo as if it were dropping into a cave with the most incredible acoustics.

It should not be happening. The apartment, and everything in it, is new. When Andrew announced that he, Maz and the girls would be relocating to Sydney, Margie decided it was her time for a fresh start as well. She had filled the period of Maz's incarceration by throwing herself into her granddaughters' lives. With Andrew steering the family ship and Margie as chief deckhand, they'd managed to survive pretty well through the twenty months. The girls had missed their mother and in the desperate hours when Margie should have been sleeping, she imagined their futures and wondered at what age they would fully grasp what had happened to them. A young child could be shielded from certain realities but at some point in their lives they would find out the truth—and what then? Would they forgive?

Would my daughters forgive me if they knew the truth?

These are the thoughts that kept her awake at night, and still do in the new place. It seems strange, but she misses her husband more in this different environment. Back in the old house, even when he was gone, she had felt him all around her. Occasionally she spoke out loud to him because it was easy to imagine he was simply in another room. Mostly she waffled about her day but she always ended the monologue by offering her love and her deepest regret. *My darling, I'll never forgive myself but I'll also never stop the work of making it up to you by ensuring our girls' lives are as happy as possible.*

Here in the apartment, it's not possible to speak to her husband—she cannot pretend he is simply in another room as he never visited the place, never conceived of it. Secondly, by any measure she has failed in her efforts to make her daughters' lives happy.

Andrew is back with a toolbox and he sets it down gently on the vanity. 'I'd hate to chip anything. It's all so perfect.'

He is such a thoughtful man, gentle and kind. Really his only fault is that awful father of his and Andrew can't be held responsible for the oafish Frank who, on first meeting, sized Margie up and down after she'd declined his offer of an alcoholic drink. 'Allergy, eh?' he'd said dismissively, shaking his head. 'What'll they think of next.' He didn't believe her, and no doubt his cop background made him assume that most people lied, Margie included. His brusque, almost bullying manner made her nervous. Thank goodness they don't see him often and thank goodness his son doesn't share Frank's overbearing ways. Calm and rational Andrew is the perfect counterbalance to her beautiful hurricane Maz. Are they too different? The thought had worried her in the early stages of the relationship. But now, Margie understands there is no real formula for a successful marriage. Some thrive out of a shared sensibility, value and energy—that's why she and Jeffrey worked so well. Maz and Andrew are more of the opposites-attract variety. Marianne always had a high sense of drama, right from the start when she went into meltdown over Margie's refusal to let her wear her sparkly rainbow tights to preschool.

'I have to,' she'd screeched in her piercing, three-year-old pitch. 'Or my

legs will fall off.'

All right, so her sense of the dramatic wasn't always convenient or enjoyable but it certainly made life interesting. Her other child, Ellinor, could not have been more different. She couldn't care less what she wore provided it was comfortable. She never had tantrums. Ate what she was given. Slept when she was told. Completely and utterly sensible. The difference between them is inexplicable, given they come from the same genes, but perhaps Margie had predetermined this chalk and cheesiness by endowing them with the names of her favourite Austen characters.

Is it some odd twist of fate that the girls have followed in the footsteps of their literary namesakes? Or has Margie conditioned them by relaying the story so regularly? Is it all Margaret's fault that Maz is the way she is?

Of course it is. She's you. She's got your defective genes.

Margie doesn't like that inner voice.

Andrew produces a spanner from the box and sets about dismantling the tap. She's drawn him here under false pretences. Well, not completely false. The tap is leaking but it's something she could easily have lived with, or she could have gone out and bought some ear plugs. But when Maz casually mentioned that Andrew was coming up to Newcastle for a client meeting, Margie jumped at the chance to get him alone. She needs to talk to him. She's worried about Marianne. She's always worried about Marianne. But she needs an honest opinion of how her daughter is faring, really faring in her new life.

Then there's Dominic and her strange encounter at the warehouse. For the past few days she's been mulling over who and what to tell. Perhaps it's the sort of thing Andrew would want to know. Or is it something she can handle alone? She's had a slightly mad idea that Dominic and Maz should meet. Or perhaps it's not that insane; she's read in the news about restorative justice meetings where victims meet their offender in an act of cleansing for both parties. Would Maz be open? Possibly not, her shame is so profound. Would Dominic? Again, possibly not given the way he has been less than upfront. Maybe she can somehow spring it on them both? It would be risky, certainly, but think of the reward: a chance for Maz to seek forgiveness and for Dominic to understand that she is not the monster the media made her out to be. In Margie's experience, people have a great fear of doing the thing that would most help them and a little push is usually what's required. That could be the case here. Question is—how to get them in a room together. How does she engineer such an occasion? She needs to think more, refine the idea. It's too soon to raise with Andrew, she decides, watching him fiddle with the tap. He's got enough on his plate and the last thing she wants is to burden him unnecessarily.

'How are things at home?' Margie starts gently. 'The girls seem madly excited for Christmas.'

'Cannot wait.' Andrew speaks through gritted teeth as he battles with the wrench.

'And what about Marianne? What's your impression there? Seems she's putting herself under enormous pressure. I'm a bit worried, to be honest. Tying herself in knots can't be good for her.'

Andrew takes his hand off the wrench and straightens. 'I know exactly what you mean.'

'So I'm not being paranoid?'

'I think you're being a normal, loving mother.'

Margaret feels her insides quieting. As always, Andrew understands. He shares her fears and takes them seriously. What a relief it is to have someone validate her worries.

Andrew rests his hip against the vanity, the wrench loose in his hands. 'I didn't want to mention this because I don't want to worry you, but Maz's been saying a few strange things lately about the accident.'

'What sorts of things?'

'She's developed an obsession with trying to remember exactly what happened. I suspect she's seeing some quack who's putting ideas in her head.'

'But why? She knows what happened. What good can come of dwelling on it? She needs to move on, for her own sake and for those two little girls.'

'Exactly what I told her but she doesn't want to listen. I understand that it preys on her mind that she can't remember, but it's not good for someone with her history to be in this heightened emotional state. She's been doing so well that I'd ... I'd hate to see her take a step backward.' He shrugs with resignation. 'I suppose guilt is a powerful force.'

Guilt. Margaret knows all about it but her daughter cannot relapse. Not now. Not ever.

'No good can come of this,' Margie mutters. 'What can we do?'

Andrew folds his arms. 'Like I said, I've tried talking to her about it but she won't listen to me. Maybe it would be better coming from you?'

'You think she would listen to me?'

'Absolutely. You've always, always been there for her and no one loves her more than you. I know you'd do anything to help her.' His eyes are beseeching. Anyone with half a brain can see how he's suffering as well. How much he has on his plate. Guilt pricks her like a needle. She shouldn't have called him over for her leaking tap. That was silly. But then again, if she hadn't made that call they might never have had this conversation and she can see it's been useful for both of them. She can help him by talking to Maz. Andrew needs that from her and from the minute her daughter was arrested, Margaret has been clear that her job in this ghastly process is to support Andrew as much as it is to support her daughter. He is key to all of this, to keeping Maz's family together. Lesser men might have turned and run and decided it was all too hard. But Andrew has stayed, so far, though they are nowhere near out of the woods. Maz is still fragile and were her husband to leave now ... well, Margie can't bear to think. Her daughter has already lost so much that to lose her marriage and custody of the children would be unbearable. Andrew must be supported and Margie can do that by taking on

some of his troubles. Now is not the time to tell him about Dominic. She can handle that one on her own.

Margaret straightens her shoulders with a sense of purpose. 'Yes, yes of course. I'll talk to her. Leave it with me.'

'Thanks, Margie. That would be great.' He smiles. 'I knew I could count on you.'

Yes, she thinks. You can count on me.

14

10 December

Marianne

Is there any greater sense of freedom than flying along a freeway at 110 kilometres an hour, foot to the floor with the car stereo blaring one of your favourite songs—in my case, ABBA’s ‘Dancing Queen’? If there is, I’m unaware of it. Of all the many, many things I missed when I was in prison, the simple act of getting in the car and driving somewhere was in my top five. After eight weeks of freedom it still gives me a thrill to kiss the girls and Andrew goodbye and get in the car and just drive. All right, so the alcohol interlock means it’s not quite the same—but I don’t mind the breathalyser, it’s like a security blanket. To get to my AA meetings, to go anywhere for that matter (public transport is almost non-existent in our leafy suburb), I have to return a zero-alcohol reading.

Tonight I sing along at top voice to the Swedish superstars. The exultant piano accompaniment used to be one of my favourite pop pieces to play—a fantastic party trick for any end-of-the-evening singalong. *Da-dum, da-dum, da-dum*, I sing into the warm, rushing air of the open window, the sun setting to my left in melting sorbet colours of lemon and orange. It’s been a good couple of days. Elli lands tomorrow and my meeting with Quentin ended with a warm handshake, an actual smile and the comment that I ‘seem to be doing all the right things’, which was about the most positive report I could have hoped for. When the girls got home from school they were absolutely thrilled with the decorations, greeting them with the excitement of discovering long-lost friends in a foreign land.

It’s my angel, Mummy. Look.

Is that the star I made in preschool? I thought we’d lost it.

Both of them clung to me with grateful happiness and in that moment I resolved to say yes to teaching Jamila’s daughter. It was a risk but one that was absolutely worth taking if it meant a smoothening of the social waters for my girls at their new school.

I rest my elbow on the window ledge and my fingers tap the leather in time with the music. The playlist rolls on to the next song, ‘The Name of the Game’—another favourite—and I boost the volume higher, euphoria in my veins. But then comes a line in the song about being a child getting older and into my head, completely unbidden, jumps the image of a baby girl swaddled in a mint-green wrap and young enough to have a milk blister on her strawberry-pink upper lip. Baby Rose. The photo that was splashed across the media and used in the sentencing hearing.

The lyrics gag in my throat as if there’s a hand choking my windpipe. My eyes burn with shame. Acid fills my mouth and I jab at the off button.

Idiot, I mutter to myself. You’re a pathetic idiot.

I’d forgotten, you see. For a few minutes, I’d completely forgotten about the family I devastated—a family that would never again experience the kind of pure joy that I’d got from decorating my house, winning over Quentin and belting out ABBA at the top of my lungs. I’d ruined that family’s life forever. I’d taken the lives of two family members—Baby Rose and her grandmother, Dianne. Maybe I’d paid my debt to society by serving time in prison but I would never be free of the crime I’d committed.

I ease my foot off the accelerator and bring the speed back under 100 kilometres an hour. Maybe it feels nice to be in control of a car, zooming along an open road at high speed. But it’s not true freedom. I will spend my life trying to make up for what I have done.

But I can never make it right.

*

Anil greets me at the back of the hall, an instant coffee in one hand, a Scotch Finger biscuit in the other, and a big, toothy smile on his face. ‘White with two sugars. Correct?’

I accept the cup and let the liquid scald my lips as I take a sip, hoping he won’t see the tension I’ve been holding in my mouth for the past half hour. Once I started thinking about Rose and Dianne in the car I couldn’t stop. I can’t even remember turning off the motorway and winding my way through the darkened bushland to this drafty wooden scout hall in the back blocks of Gosford—far enough away from both Waratah Heights and Newcastle to offer relative anonymity. The last thing I want is to run into someone I know.

‘Marianne, what’s wrong? You’re as white as a sheet.’ Anil ushers me away from the refreshments table where our fellow alcoholics are chomping on biscuits and stirring their watery brews with ice-cream sticks. We sit in the chairs that line the walls under a photo of King Charles.

‘On my way here I was thinking about the accident. The child and the woman I ... the ones who died.’ I rush out the words before the emotion overtakes me.

Anil nods, his brown eyes soft with empathy. On paper, he and I aren’t exactly a perfect match. How could I have anything in common with a single

sixty-three-year-old bookkeeper who worships three Hindu gods? But in the time since I've been released, he's shown me nothing but warmth, understanding and support. Apart from our obvious connection—we're both alcoholics—I know he understands loss. His wife left him because of his addiction and he hasn't seen his kids for fifteen years, even though he's been sober for all of that time. *'They cannot forgive me for what I did and I accept this. What I did to them was unforgivable.'*

Anil produces a clean hanky from his pocket—pale blue, neatly pressed—and hands it to me. 'Remember what we have discussed, Marianne. Addiction is a monster that's fuelled by guilt and shame. We drink to bury our darkest feelings. We practise self-forgiveness not to absolve ourselves from our sins of the past, but to ensure we don't repeat them in the future.'

'But it's different for you, Anil. You remember the things you did. You've apologised to your family. Maybe they can't forgive you but at least you've tried. I can't even do that. I don't even remember it.' I twist the hanky between my fingers, tightening till it's noose-like.

Anil touches my arm, gently removes the cloth. 'I was a drunk. You think I actually remember all the things I said and did to my wife and children?'

'Were you violent towards them?' As soon as the words are out of my mouth I'm aware of how personal and inappropriate the question is. What right do I have to ask it? But part of me wants to know how poorly Anil behaved so I can gauge whether it was ever reasonable to expect their forgiveness.

His shoulders sink an inch. His gaze lowers. 'It's possible,' he says softly. 'It's possible.'

*

At tonight's meeting we have a speaker, Don—an accountant in his fifties who relies heavily on meditation to curb his cravings. Once he's shared his story of how he fell into alcohol addiction as a crutch to manage the stresses of owning and operating his own business, he offers to lead us in a meditation. 'Ten minutes a day, and I guarantee it will help to declutter your mind. Keep you centred and focused on your sobriety.'

First he asks us to find a comfortable position (we're seated in hard-backed plastic chairs, which makes it difficult) then he tells us to close our eyes and bring awareness to our breath. 'Don't try to force or control it in any way. Let it flow in the way it wants. In and out. No effort at all. Place your hands on your knees in a position that's comfortable for you.'

Because of my work with Nadine I find it easy to tune in to Don's voice, which is low and resonant. When the image of Baby Rose leaps into my blackened vision I gently ease her away again and visualise my happy place: lying on a beach, sun on my back, waves lapping.

'If you're experiencing a craving right now, breathe into it ... and release. Focus on the sensation of it in your body. Where is it? How big is it? Does it

have a shape? A colour? What does it look like? Now, take a deep breath in to the count of four and breathe directly into that feeling.'

As it happens, I'm not experiencing a craving right at this moment so I encourage my brain to take me to another moment when the urge to drink was powerful. When one arrives, it almost takes my breath away. It's the day of the accident and I know this because of the silk fuchsia blouse and black pants. I'm walking out the front door, car keys in hand, and I'm arguing with Andrew, who's shouting at me to stop.

'Don't do it, Maz. You know you'll regret it. You're not in your right mind.'

But I'm blind with rage, energised by anger and alcohol. I push him away, push him backward, my hands against his sternum, and his eyes widen with surprise because I've never been physical with him before. I've never so much as laid a finger on a flea.

In that musty scout hall which smells of instant coffee and old floor polish my eyes flicker and I sense my muscles twitching, trying to force me out of the meditative state. And now the images that had been so vibrant and clear are starting to break up like a storm is buffeting the TV antenna, pixelating the picture. I clench my eyes more tightly shut but it's no good. The picture's gone. My eyes flick open and I observe the group, deep in focus and meditation, accomplishing the thing I should have been able to do but failed at, yet again. The memories are there. That's the encouraging sign. But when will I be mentally strong enough to see them through to the finish line? It's so frustrating it makes me want to scream. I know that if I could just unlock the visions, I'd have greater peace. Maybe I'd even be able to achieve what Anil wants for me—a sense of self-forgiveness.

I close my eyes and try desperately to conjure up the imagery again. What was it that had made me so angry towards Andrew? But instead what comes to me is a different memory—of the very first time he and I fought over my drinking.

Our wedding day.

15

Before

Marianne

When people say they have no regrets about anything they've done in their lives, I mentally call bullshit. Life consists of a trillion and one decisions and it's impossible to always make the right one—like my decision to eat prawn pasta at a country RSL club thirteen weeks before the wedding. My lord was I sick and I had no one to blame but myself; you should never order seafood in a place that's more than six hours away from the ocean. Did I have regrets? Absolutely. Especially when, a few weeks later, I was still finding myself clutched around a toilet bowl on most mornings. I hadn't planned on losing weight for the wedding—the dress was a perfect fit—but the kilos had been dropping away.

‘Marianne, is it possible that you could be pregnant?’

It was the GP's first question as I described the ongoing fatigue and nausea that had plagued me since the night of the dodgy pasta.

‘I highly doubt it.’

Much as Andrew and I were keen to start a family, the last thing I wanted was to be pregnant at my own wedding; not for any particular reasons of morality but simply because the dress of my dreams was a figure-hugging mermaid style that would not accommodate a bump. Also I wanted to let my hair down and have some fun—not that pregnant women can't have fun but I knew enough about gestation to know the early months could take a huge physical toll. I was a conscientious taker of the contraceptive pill and even while I was sick, we'd taken extra precautions because vomiting could affect its effectiveness.

The doctor handed me a sample jar and ushered me towards the bathroom. ‘How about we check to make sure? At least to rule it out.’

When the two lines appeared I felt as if all the blood in my body drained towards my feet.

‘Let's take some blood to put it beyond doubt.’ The GP had a forced

briskness that made me think she had been through this many times before with women just like me who never quite understood that there was no 100 per cent fail-safe method of contraception.

‘The results should be back in a couple of days. In the meantime, I suggest plenty of rest, plain food for the nausea and maybe a pregnancy multivitamin. Folic acid is so crucial to baby’s spinal development, and if there’s no baby it certainly won’t hurt.’

I walked out of the surgery and blinked into the sunlight—dazed by the glare and the news. Standing on the footpath with cars rushing by on the busy main road I fished out my phone to ring Andrew.

‘Hey, what’s up? Everything okay?’

We rarely spoke during the day—Andrew was either tied up in meetings or court and my news was rarely important enough to interrupt either.

Except this.

I relayed everything from the doctor’s office including the positive urine test.

‘And how reliable are those tests?’ His voice was calm. This was one of the things I loved about him. He took things slowly, never panicked.

‘I don’t know. The doctor took some blood to be sure.’ I pressed the phone more tightly to my ear and heard the sound of a keyboard being tapped.

‘Says here that urine tests are generally ninety-nine per cent accurate. False negatives are possible, but false positives are rare.’ Another pause. ‘I think we’re going to have a baby.’

My eyes grew hot at the word *baby*. This wasn’t just a pregnancy, it was a human being. The start of our family.

‘Are you okay about this? It wasn’t quite the timing we wanted ...’ My voice cracked on the words.

‘Oh, Maz. Maz, honey. This is exactly what I wanted from the moment we met. You are going to be such a beautiful mum. I couldn’t be more excited.’

My throat thickened to the point where I couldn’t speak. I was so overcome with love but when Andrew spoke again there was concern in his voice. ‘But are you okay with this? I can hear you’re upset. I know you didn’t want to be pregnant for the wedding. I’m so sorry, honey.’

‘That was just my vanity speaking.’ I let out a laugh-sob. ‘I’m actually really happy. I just ... sometimes I get so overwhelmed with how much I love you. It’s almost ... scary.’

Now it was Andrew’s turn to laugh. ‘A good kind of scary, I hope.’

‘The best.’

*

We married in front of sixty of our nearest and dearest at a sweet little stone chapel and the reception was at the riverside restaurant where Andrew had first told me he loved me. I managed to make it down the aisle and Andrew definitely put the ring on my finger. Apart from that I don’t really have any

other good memories. When I look back at the photos what I see is a gaunt bride who looks like the python that swallowed a cat. Skinny frame with a pronounced belly. No one except Elli and our parents knew about the pregnancy and their reactions, when we told them, could not have been more different.

Elli was happy but in a muted way, and I put that down to her understanding of the risks; one in four pregnancies ended in miscarriage, usually in the first twelve weeks. She didn't want to get too attached to the idea of being an auntie, I reasoned to myself against the background flutters of disappointment.

Frank had frowned and sighed. 'So now it's a shotgun wedding, eh?'

'Not really,' Andrew had said mildly, taking my hand. 'Pregnancy or not, we were always going to marry.'

But my future father-in-law's eyes had bored into me, like I was to blame or that it was yet another example of me trapping his son into something he didn't want. Frank, with his intimidating cop aura, scared me. We'd only met him a handful of times but he had this habit of looking at me like I was an X-ray, and he could see inside into all my flaws and insecurities where he deduced I wasn't as smart or substantial as his son, which was possibly true.

'He doesn't like me,' I'd told Andrew after our first meeting.

'He doesn't know you. That's just him. Give it time.'

But time changed nothing and Frank greeted the news of both our engagement and the pregnancy with a similar gruff dismissiveness that implied it was all a terrible idea.

Mum, on the other hand, was thrilled about the pregnancy and quickly did the maths. 'By the time of the wedding, you'll be just past that awful morning sickness but not showing enough for anyone to know.'

She was wrong on both counts. I was still as sick as a dog, to the point where I'd been hospitalised more than once for dehydration and received an official diagnosis of hyperemesis gravidarum—the most extreme form of morning sickness. After my second trip to hospital for IV fluids, the doctors prescribed a medication used to treat nausea in chemotherapy patients. They warned me about all the side effects, from tiredness and constipation to blurred vision and heart problems.

'But is it safe for the baby?'

'We think so.'

'Think so?'

'There's possibly an increased risk of cleft palate. But the data is limited.'

Right. So, they wanted me to take a relatively untested drug meant for cancer patients that could cause me heart problems and a cleft palate for my child? Were they crazy?

'Can I ... Can I choose to do nothing? It's just a bit of vomiting after all. It might go away on its own, right?'

The doctor had looked at me over his glasses. 'You've been hospitalised twice in two months. You've lost weight when you should be gaining it. If we

let this go untreated it will increase your risk of low birth weight, premature birth, pre-eclampsia and eclampsia.'

Andrew had rubbed my back. He wanted me to take the medication. 'Hon, you're overreacting. You have to listen to the experts, and to me. You can't live like this and it's not good for the baby. Please don't be silly about it.'

I flinched. Silly? I was being silly to question the doctors? To question Andrew? I felt stung. All I wanted was to protect the baby, but then again, perhaps I was being overdramatic. It wouldn't have been the first time. The more I thought about it, the more I realised that my uber-rational fiancé was right, though he could have phrased it more kindly. I couldn't go on the same way. Work was becoming untenable because I had to disappear into the toilet every five minutes. The only foods I could stomach were dry crackers and peanuts and I was going to bed every night at 7 pm, sleeping for a full twelve hours and then waking still feeling exhausted. Then there was the prospect of spending my wedding day stuck in a toilet—it wouldn't be fair to me or Andrew. At one point, he suggested we delay the wedding until after the baby but I was adamant we go ahead. Being pregnant at the wedding would be hard, but I imagined that having a baby present would be even harder.

With reluctance, and hope, I took the pills and went from vomiting eight times a day to only four.

On the day of the wedding, the chauffeur pulled over and Elli held my hair back as I puked into the gutter. At the chapel I'd jokingly suggested the celebrant keep a bucket handy behind the altar.

Except it wasn't really a joke.

All through the service I concentrated on one thing and one thing only—not being sick. I visualised opening my mouth to say the vows and vomit coming out instead of promises to love, honour and care. The whole time, Andrew kept hold of my sweaty hand. From the tightness in his smile I knew he understood my suffering. During the lunch—a beautiful two-course meal of gravlax and beef fillet—I disappeared into the bathroom. Elli discovered me sitting on the toilet and snacking on crackers, tears streaming down my face.

'Oh, Maz. No. Not on your wedding day. Shall I get Andrew?'

'Please don't.'

'What is it? Is this about him? You're not having second thoughts, are you?'

Where did that question come from? 'No. God, no. I just feel so incredibly sick. I want to die.' Sour saliva pooled in my mouth and I swallowed with effort. 'I want this to be over.'

'The wedding? Or the pregnancy?'

'Both. Look at me.' I knew I looked terrible. The dress was gorgeous but it wasn't designed for a scarecrow with a distended belly. The make-up artist, bless her, had trowelled on the foundation to cover my peaky skin and black shadows. For some reason, I'd agreed to let her attach false eyelashes and

from the reflection in the bathroom mirror I could see it had been a bad idea. 'I look like a starving panda who got stuck in a tanning salon.'

Elli assessed me dispassionately. 'More undernourished-Trump than starving panda.'

I let out a weak laugh. 'It's not funny.'

'Indeed.' She outstretched a hand to pull me up. 'What's say you and I ditch this reception and go get smashed on the jetty?'

My eyes widened. 'Are you insane?' I pointed to my belly. 'What about this?'

'Shit. Yes. Okay, well how about you come to the jetty and watch me get rip-roaringly drunk? You'll love it.'

'I can't abandon my own wedding. What about Andrew?'

'He can come too.'

So that's what we did. After the speeches and official business were done, I grabbed a bottle of champagne, three glasses and my two favourite people in the world and took them down to the jetty where we sat at the end of the dock, the sun pouring petrol on the horizon while Elli got sozzled and Andrew sipped mineral water from a champagne flute in solidarity with me.

At one point Elli threw back her head in laughter at something Andrew had said and it occurred to me how beautiful she looked, how carefree. So ... un-pregnant and unencumbered. I outstretched my hand for the bottle. 'Here, pass it over.'

'You can't, Maz. You're pregnant.' A horrified Andrew took my hand.

'Just a sip. Please.' I wrenched my hand from his grasp and wiggled my fingers for Elli to hand it over. 'One sip.' My craving for that taste, that numbing warmth of champagne, thrummed in my veins.

'Maz, you can't be serious.' Andrew's voice had a parental quality that grated on me. 'You know there's no safe level of alcohol for a baby. Don't be silly.'

There was that word again. Silly.

I pushed his hand away. 'It's just one damn sip.'

'Maz,' he said. 'Don't.' It was so easy for him, sitting there in judgement. But the most galling thing of all: I knew, deep down, he was right. There was no safe amount of alcohol for a baby. But a sip couldn't possibly do substantial harm.

'Well, thank you, husband,' I said, getting to my feet and ignoring his outstretched hand to help me up. 'For showing absolutely no faith in me.'

For the next hour, I avoided Andrew and circulated among the guests. At 5 pm, he touched my shoulder to tell me the seaplane was waiting. In the bathroom I changed into a white pants suit and a little runabout ferried us to the seaplane, ready to whisk us away to an exclusive retreat further up the river. Our guests gathered on the dock to wave us goodbye and I thought back to our date when Andrew had told me he loved me. The naturalness of that moment. How, even though we'd argued earlier today, I knew that all of this was right. He would always, always protect me.

‘Andrew,’ I said as the plane gathered speed and the scenery began to blur. It was the first word I had said to him since our fight on the dock. I wanted to tell him that I was sorry for what had happened, that I knew he was right. That what he’d said, he’d said to protect me and the baby. ‘Andrew,’ I repeated over the roaring engine. ‘Andrew.’ I touched his arm. He was looking down at our guests and he was frowning. This is what I had done. I had made him unhappy with my own selfish desires. I’d cast a shadow over what should have been the happiest day of our lives—and I could never take that back. Saliva flooded my mouth.

‘Andrew, I think I’m going to be sick.’

16

11 December

Marianne

As I navigate my way through a seemingly full car park, I begin to wish I'd listened to my sister's suggestion that we meet at home.

'I'll get a train,' she'd said. 'Or an Uber. You've got enough on your plate. Honestly, Maz. Don't worry about me.'

But I do worry about her. The airport pickup is all part of the Make-Christmas-Perfect mission. We need our *Love Actually* moment, complete with enthusiastic discarding of luggage followed by a lengthy and very public hug.

I swing the car into a spot that's at least five kilometres from the terminal. My phone app tells me the flight has landed. What's the point of this whole palaver if I'm not there when she walks out? There's no romance in standing in an airport terminal like a lamppost, waiting and wondering and feeling unloved.

I hold my handbag across my chest like it's a seat belt and start to run.

That first hug is even better than I've been imagining. I bring her in tightly, then let go again to make sure my eyes aren't deceiving me. But it's really her, smiling her slightly crooked smile, cap askew from the forcefulness of our embrace.

'Hey, look at you. The colour actually suits you. It really does.'

My hand goes self-consciously to my hair. I hadn't told her about the new colour, partly out of fear she'd talk me out of it. She was always telling me how I had no reason to carry the shame. I'd made a mistake and I'd paid for it. There was no need to hide. She genuinely thought this.

'Not too dark?' I say.

'Just the right side of Morticia Addams.'

'God, I've missed you. Have you made that appointment? I'll come with you if you like.' My words rush out like water from a tap. I'm so anxious to make this perfect, to show how much I've missed her.

Elli holds up her hands. 'Maz, please. Give me a minute. I've only just stepped off the plane.'

'Sorry, yep. Of course.' But her irritation stings. It's not like her to be cross with me. Blue veins run like a road map under the translucent skin of her forehead and the shadows sit like bags of bruises under her eyes. 'You look tired. Rough flight?'

'Rough winter more like it. I look like a corpse.' She grins. 'You don't have to sugar-coat it.'

'You're a corpse with excellent fashion sense.' I gesture to her Burberry trench and black Mulberry bag.

'I've become a walking London cliche.'

I lean in and sniff the expensive aroma of Santal 33. Four hundred dollars a bottle. 'You even smell like one.'

'I know.' Elli makes a face. 'I'm the worst.'

We both dissolve into a laugh and I grip my sister tightly. She's the best. Always the best.

As we drive out of the airport Elli asks if she can put the window down and when I tell her to go for it she sticks her head into the wind like an appreciative canine and closes her eyes to the December sun.

'The air here.' She sniffs appreciatively. 'So good.'

'I think the exhaust fumes have gone to your head.' I shoot her a glance then come back to the road to find brake lights blaring at me from the car in front. I slam my foot down on the pedal and put out my arm to stop Elli from whiplashing forward. Her eyes spring open and for a split second there's genuine terror as she thinks we're going to crash. She lets out a strangled cry of 'No' and covers her face with her hands.

'That idiot.' I slam down on the horn. 'What a dickhead.' Fury towards the other driver sweeps through my body like a tsunami.

Elli re-positions herself in the seat. 'That was close. Are you okay?'

I close my eyes for a second and those images jump into my mind again, of hands on the steering wheel, Andrew and I fighting over the car keys. All night, after I got home from AA, the memories swirled in my mind like a leaf caught in a whirlwind. While I was sleeping, I had another visualisation. This time it wasn't just my hands slipping over the steering wheel, there were a man's hands—Andrew's. In my dream, the sun glinted off his wedding ring as his fingers clenched the wheel. When I woke, it came to me.

He'd tried to save me. He'd tried to stop me from getting in the car, and then, when I was about to crash, he'd tried to steer us out of the way. If only I'd let him.

But is what I'm remembering even true? How can I trust these visualisations? I didn't get a chance to ask Andrew this morning because I woke after he'd left with the girls.

A toot comes from the car behind and jerks me back to the present.

'Jesus. Back off. I'm moving, all right?' I give a terse wave to the driver behind and slowly ease my foot back to the accelerator. But my gaze is flitting all over the place. The near miss has set every nerve fibre on edge

and my heartbeat is *molto staccato* in my chest.

‘Hey, Maz. Talk to me.’ Elli lightly touches my thigh.

‘Sorry, I wasn’t paying enough attention.’

‘You’re as white as a sheet.’

I put the back of my palm to my forehead where small beads of sweat have sprouted. If anyone will understand the visions I’ve been having, it’s Elli. She’s always the voice of calm and rationality.

‘I remembered something else from the accident,’ I begin, eyes still fixed on the cars in front. Elli lets me speak without interruption as I describe the memories and feel the weight of her gaze on me, how it charges the air between us with meaning and with love. When I finish I allow myself a brief glance at her but her face is largely neutral and for that I’m grateful. Apart from Andrew she’s the only other person who saw me at the scene of the accident. Apparently, she was the one who got straight on the phone to emergency services while Andrew did his best to look after me.

When I finish, the only sound is the clicking of the indicator which, in the silence, ticks like the countdown to a detonation.

‘Well,’ I begin after seconds of metronomic silence. ‘What do you think? Am I remembering it correctly? Did Andrew try to stop me from getting in the car? Did I attack him?’

Elli’s eyes are fixed on a point outside her window. She’s thinking, no doubt working out how to gently tell me that my brain has got it wrong, that what I’ve remembered can’t possibly be a correct record of what actually happened.

‘Honestly?’ She looks at me and there’s a sheen of sweat on her pale forehead, like a fine mist of rain over a bride’s veil. ‘I don’t know.’

‘But you were there in the house. You must know why I was so angry. Did we fight about something? Did I push him?’

‘I stayed in the house when you left so I didn’t see. You’d been drinking and Andrew didn’t want you to drive. Neither of us did. But you weren’t listening.’

‘Was that it, though? There must have been something else that made me angry enough to attack my own husband?’

My sister is silent. Lips pressed shut. She wants to say something but won’t.

‘Please, Elli. Please say what you’re thinking.’

Our eyes meet. ‘Alcohol made you a different person, Maz. You did things you would never normally do. Things that made no sense at all. Maybe there was no reason for your anger, maybe it was just the alcohol. I don’t know. It was such a confusing time. I’m not sure I remember it all that clearly either.’

I let her comment settle over me. She’s right. It had been a confusing, tumultuous time, especially after the accident. There were my injuries, the police interviews and the terrible, terrible guilt that crushed me. The immediate aftermath is what I remember with a clarity that’s almost painful. Waking up in the hospital bed. The terrible pain down my left side and the

thick, tight bandages around my head and forearm. The fear and concern in Andrew's face. The quiver in his voice when he explained what had happened, what I had done, the devastation. I remember how the food tasted like cement in my mouth and how I pushed the ice cream away because I knew I didn't deserve anything that tasted like comfort.

My grip on the steering wheel tightens like I'm choking it to death. 'I feel like such an idiot. Again, this is all my fault. All my fuck-up. You're right. We probably didn't fight about anything, it was probably just me being a drunk.'

'Hey, hey, it's okay.' Elli touches my shoulder. 'How about you turn in here, so we can talk.' She gestures to a roadside McDonald's and I pull into the car park, kill the engine and let the tears flow.

'Why can't I leave it alone?' I slap the steering wheel. 'I don't even know why I'm pursuing this. What happened that day is two people died and nothing will ever change that fact—and nothing can change the fact that I was responsible. Maybe this is nothing more than a pathetic effort to shift the blame. I don't know. I don't know,' I groan. 'I just wish I could forget it. Move on. But I can't. Until I know, in here, what I did that day, it's never going to quite feel real. Or that I've taken full responsibility.'

Elli leans over and takes my chin. 'You entered a guilty plea at the first opportunity. You spent nearly two years in a detention facility. You wrote the most comprehensive letter of remorse to the family. How much more responsibility can you take?'

'But I'm still here. I'm still alive. I get to be around for my girls, for Andrew, for you. I get to host Christmas.'

Elli shoots me a wry glance. 'Yep, you really are the luckiest.'

'You know what I mean.' I take a pause, afraid of what I'm about to say next. 'The only true justice would be if I had died that day, too. It would have been easier for everyone, me included.'

My voice dissolves into breathy sobs and Elli takes me in her arms, ignoring the seat belts and gearstick and the general awkwardness of our side-by-side position. 'Hey, hey. You can't think that way. We need you. Andrew, the girls, Mum, me. We need you to be around.' There's a fierceness in her voice that belies the fear in it. She's trying to talk me out of something and I pull away from the embrace.

'You don't have to worry. I wouldn't do anything ... silly. I couldn't put you all through any more hell than I already have but you can't blame me for thinking about that day and thinking about how differently things might have panned out. You have to allow me that space. You're the only person I can say these things to.'

This time it is me who pulls her in for a hug, hoping she can feel my strength rather than my weakness. 'I've missed you so much.'

'I've missed you, too, Mazzie-Maz,' she whispers into my ear. 'Like you wouldn't believe.'

When we pull apart I glance in the rear-view mirror at my tear-stained face where the mascara has bled like spilt ink. Elli's eyes are conjunctivitis-

red.

‘Look at us,’ I giggle. ‘A sad-panda and a cokehead.’

Elli leans over. ‘Oh, Christ. We’re horrifying.’ She pinches her cheeks. ‘I can’t see the girls looking like this. They’ll be terrified.’

‘Scarred for life.’

‘You know what we need?’ A smile spreads across her face. ‘We need to get in that restaurant and eat. Two Big Macs. A thickshake and an ice cream for dessert.’

I groan with pleasure. ‘We can’t. Think of the cholesterol. Think of the calories.’

‘Maz,’ she speaks with a straight face. ‘This is an emergency and only a McFlurry can save us.’

I can’t help but laugh at this and we walk into Maccas arm in arm.

Elli’s here. Everything will be okay. I’m going to do everything I can to help her realise her dream of becoming a mother.

I know she’ll be so much better at it than me.

17

Before

Maz

There is this moment after childbirth—after the pain and shouting and midwives and lights and bleeding and injections—when everything suddenly goes quiet. Like someone has pulled down the circus tent and all that's left behind is crushed grass and gaping silence. With Harper that moment came after an eighteen-hour labour, a forceps delivery, and a minor haemorrhage.

'Well, I'll leave you to it then,' said the midwife, Orla. 'Anything you need, just give us a bell. But honestly, you look like a natural.'

I did not feel like a natural. I felt brutalised and abandoned. Three hours earlier I'd lost my shit entirely when the obstetrician mentioned the word *forceps* and produced a medieval set of salad servers. The doctor tried to calm me down by explaining how the spoons would clamp around my baby's head and with a vacuum attached to her scalp they'd gently pull her out of where she'd become stuck in the birth canal.

'N-n-n-n-o, you c-c-c-can't.' My teeth chattered so badly from pain and nerves that I could barely force out the words. 'Y-y-y-you'll hurt her. And m-m-m-me.'

The doctor had put his hand on my shoulder. 'Marianne, your baby's heart rate is elevated and it's not coming down. She needs to come out now. The longer we discuss this, the more you're putting your baby in danger. And we wouldn't want that, would we now?'

'C'mon, Maz. Listen to him. We have to do this,' said Andrew.

What could I say? The doctor, and my husband, had me cornered. 'O-o-o-o-okay.'

But when the doctor turned away to get the implements ready, I'd grabbed Andrew's hand, not bothering to stop the tears streaming down my face. 'D-d-d-don't let him do this to m-m-m-me. I'm s-s-s-so s-s-s-s-cared.'

'Maz, honey.' He'd put his head next to mine and whispered in my ear. 'Time to put on your big girl pants now. It's going to be okay but you need to

do what he says, all right? Not just for the baby's sake but for yours too. You are both my priority.'

'P-p-p-please talk to him. M-m-m-make sure he understands. He's scaring me.'

He squeezed my hand and left my side to talk to the doctor. I watched Andrew gesticulating then listening. When the doctor returned he spoke in a calm, apologetic manner. 'I've performed this procedure many, many times and I wouldn't be recommending it if it wasn't necessary. Mothers and babies have a much better outcome when we perform an assisted delivery rather than caesarean section.'

The change in attitude was extraordinary. Later I learnt that my husband had threatened to bring the full force of Fincher and Bignall against the doctor if he didn't change his tone. 'Not my finest hour,' Andrew said, chagrined.

But I disagreed.

*

Our first official visitor was Elli, brandishing sushi, cheese and champagne. 'I know the first two are fine but wasn't sure about the third.'

'I don't know. Orla? Any advice?'

Andrew was out of the room sourcing vases and the midwife looked up from her paperwork. 'Let's put baby on the boob for a wee suck, then get her off and have that drink.' Her eyes went to the doorway and she lowered her voice. '*Sláinte*, I say. The least you deserve after what you've been through.'

'That bad, huh?' Elli positioned herself on the bed.

'You have no idea.' I popped a piece of salmon sushi in my mouth and closed my eyes to enjoy the soft sea taste and unctuous texture. Oh, I had missed this, and everything the doctors said about the nausea was true. It had evaporated the minute Harper came out.

'This lady was a trouper.' Orla popped the folder back in its slot. 'She had the full catastrophe—forceps, vacuum and a nice little episiotomy for dessert.'

'Episiotomy,' Elli repeated. 'That's where they ...' She made a snipping motion with her fingers.

'Exactly. And in the place where you really don't want it.' Orla picked up the sleeping Harper from her crib and positioned her on my chest. 'Give her cheek a tickle, then put her lips up near the nipple. That's it. When she opens a little wider, that's when you go in.'

I did as Orla said but Harper would not separate her lips and I felt clumsy as I repeatedly pushed her mouth towards the nipple. 'I can't. She won't open. What am I doing wrong?'

Tears felt close. Wasn't this all supposed to come naturally? I'd seen other mothers do it, babies latching on like it was nothing at all.

Orla frowned. 'It's not you, love, it's this little stubborn missy. Tell you

what. Let's leave it a wee while and try again in half an hour.'

The midwife returned Harper to the crib and Elli waited till the door was closed before she spoke again. 'How are you, really?'

'I've got a pad the size of a surfboard between my legs and Orla stuffed it with a Zooper Dooper.'

'Gosh, that's no way to treat an icy pole.' Elli spoke with a straight face but the joke made me laugh and wince.

'Don't be funny. It hurts. Everything hurts.'

She hopped off the bed and peered into the crib. 'Looks like someone tried to eat her with a spoon.'

'That's the forceps.'

'Brutal,' Elli muttered. 'Can I have a hold?' Without waiting for an answer she scooped my little ice-cream bundle into her arms. 'You gorgeous girl. Can't blame a person for wanting to eat you up.'

'Look at you go, Auntie Elli.'

She made a face but kept swaying back and forth. 'Auntie Elli makes me sound like a Beverly Hillbilly. I think plain old Elli will do just fine.'

When Andrew returned, she gave him a kiss of congratulations and handed over Harper as if handing over a priceless Fabergé egg. 'Here, you take her while I take care of the important business.'

She popped the champagne and a flutter went off in my belly. I almost licked my lips in anticipation of how good that cold fizz would taste. How much I deserved it. Had earnt it. Elli poured the bubbles into three paper cups.

'One for Dad. One for Mum and a very big one for the new aunt.' She held hers up. 'Cheers,' she said. 'Or, in Orla's words—*sláinte*.'

But Andrew didn't drink. 'Maz, are you sure it's okay? What about the baby? Won't the alcohol go straight into the milk?'

'I fed her before. And I'm only having a drop. See?' I tilted the cup in Andrew's direction so he could inspect the minuscule amount that Elli had poured. Would my sister pull me up on my slight-mistruth? I had *tried* to feed Harper, and Orla would soon be back to try again but the allure of the alcohol was too much. The smell had me pining for that oozy, warm feeling that would numb my physical and emotional pain.

'Always good to get the first parenting disagreement out of the way nice and early,' said Elli, trying to lighten the mood.

I shot her a grateful look but Andrew's frown deepened. 'She's so tiny. Anything could hurt her.'

My anger flared. Didn't he trust me? I looked at him, properly, watching our baby with such love and care. He was trying. He was exhausted. He was thinking of the baby. My irritation dissolved.

'You're still traumatised by what you just saw?' I patted the bed for him to take a seat. 'You're not alone there. But I would never do anything to harm our baby. If it worries you that much, I won't have it.' I handed the cup back to Elli and took my husband's hand. As the mattress shifted under his

weight I winced again. What exactly was going on in my groin area? All I felt was a sort of numb pressure. Like someone had stuck a bowling ball into my undies.

When I tried to get off the bed to go to the toilet, Andrew gave me a hand and I limped into the bathroom, feeling as though my insides were about to fall out. Sitting on the toilet seat my eyes went hot. When I attempted to engage my pelvic floor to stop the flow of urine, nothing responded. I had lost all control and there was this stinging sensation—the stitches, I presumed. I used toilet paper to wipe the tears off my cheeks. I didn't want Andrew and Elli to see me crying. Didn't want them to fuss. Outside, they were chatting in low voices and the occasional chuckles filtered through. When I came back out the two of them stopped talking and turned their gaze on me.

'Don't stop on my account.' I hobbled back towards the bed. 'Keep chatting.'

'Oh, no. We were just talking shop.' Elli waved her hand dismissively then collected her handbag off the floor. 'Time for me to make a move, I think.'

'You've only just arrived,' I protested.

'I've talked to enough mums at work to know that hospital visits to new mothers should be short and sharp.' She went to the crib and leant over. 'Just needed to see this cherub for myself.'

'She's pretty great, isn't she?' Andrew spoke through a yawn. He looked exhausted.

'Maybe you should be getting home, too, babe,' I said. 'Been a big day for all of us.'

I didn't want Andrew to leave. I wasn't ready to be on my own with this child for whom I had no real feeling except intense fear. What kind of mother fears their own child? What was I scared of?

'You sure? I am pretty whacked but I'm very happy to stay if you need me?'

We'd agreed that while I was in hospital Andrew would work as much as possible, figuring that I'd need more support when I was home. Sensible. But now that he was about to leave I was gripped with a panic I couldn't explain, especially not to the two people in the world who most believed in my maternal capacity.

I swallowed, my mouth dry. 'Not at all. I'll be fine. We'll be fine.' I gestured to the nurse-call button. 'All the help I need is right here.'

From the bed, with Harper tucked into my side, I watched them leave together. Andrew held the door for Elli, who walked through it as naturally as if he had done it a thousand times over for her, which of course, he had. The work-talk struck up even before they'd crossed the threshold.

A silence that I've never experienced before descended on the room and into the void rushed my panic, filling every square inch with noisy, anxious thoughts.

What if she cries?

What if she doesn't stop?

What if there's something wrong with her? Like, really wrong?

Right on cue, Harper opened her mouth and let out a squawk that made me jump. I looked down at her face, eyes screwed shut so tightly like she couldn't bear to look. The black hole of her mouth opened wider and I reflexively clenched my thighs in preparation for the bellow to come and in that sound I heard the message that resonated in my gut, right down through my intestines and into my stitches.

You might know how to keep a child alive but you have no idea how to be a mother.

By the time morning came around, I'd had no sleep and the champagne bottle was empty.

*

The baby health nurse held her pencil poised. Seraphina was her name but it didn't suit her sensible navy slacks and scrubs-like top. Mentally, I renamed her Lorraine. 'I have felt sad or miserable most of the time, quite often, not very often or not at all?'

'Um ... not at all.' I spoke softly in deference to the sleep-heavy Harper in my arms. This, I had learnt in the three weeks since her birth, was the only position in which she liked to sleep.

'I have been so unhappy that I have been crying most of the time, quite often, only occasionally or never. Which one?' Seraphina/Lorraine looked up. Were her parents disappointed, I wondered, that the child to whom they'd given a wild sprite's name, a name that lent itself towards being a performance artist or a percussive musician, had ended up in that most practical and useful occupation of nursing? Because you just didn't know, did you, how your child would turn out. The things they would love or not love, whether they would be sleepers or non-sleepers, good breastfeeders or bottle-only types, if they would like being swaddled or see it as a personal escape challenge. All the parenting books assumed a baby could be moulded like a piece of clay—that habits and routines could be imposed upon them as if they had no say, no agency.

This was a lie.

Since Harper's birth, I had learnt that I knew nothing about parenting. I understood her basic requirements for food and shelter. What I had not grasped was how to keep either one of us happy. At most points in the day there was crying, both hers and mine—sometimes together, sometimes separately, but our house was basically awash with tears. Perhaps I was imagining things but the air was distinctly clammy and had a sea-ish aroma which I assumed was the salt. One day, I'd fallen asleep in the rocking chair and had this dream that I was twelve years old and back on a school excursion to Jenolan Caves and we were marvelling at these ancient and spiky stalactites and stalagmites, formed drip by drip in a chemical reaction

between the water and limestone. It was like being inside the jaws of a shark, dark and dank and with rows of white teeth everywhere. Then a baby started crying and, despite the fear pounding in my chest, I tiptoed around the shark teeth to peer into the cot. It was Harper. This wasn't a cave, this was her nursery. I woke from that dream with a choke and a gasp. Harper was crying but instead of rushing to her side I stayed glued to that seat paralysed by the fear of the stalagmites upon which I might be impaled, or the stalactites that could drop like a sword from the ceiling.

I let Harper cry until she tired into breathy sobs. Less than two metres away I cried silent tears that lasted far longer than my baby's.

Three hours later that's how Andrew found me—hunched forward, head in hands, eyes closed but still producing a stream that ran down my face and dripped onto the floor. The stalagmite would be at least to my shins by now.

'Hey, baby, you're okay, Harps. It's okay. Dad's here.'

She was crying again, softly and justifiably. No food for four hours and a nappy wedged tight with urine. Fair enough that Andrew attended to her first while his wife sat in a silent puddle of tears. The guilt was consuming. I'd officially given up on breastfeeding but I was yet to tell Andrew. He thought it was expressed milk in the freezer but it was formula I'd made up and decanted into little plastic pouches.

'I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I just ... I can't do this.'

With Harper in his arms Andrew crouched by my side. He sniffed and recoiled. 'You've been drinking.'

'Only a couple of glasses.'

His eyebrows shot up. 'You think it's acceptable to drink alcohol when you're alone with our baby?' He spoke with a calm, lawyerly tone as if addressing a witness in the courtroom and his emotional detachment struck a match to my anger.

'You don't understand. You're never here and she cries all the time. I can't live like this.' I flexed my hands to indicate my state of dishevelment. It was 6 pm and I hadn't managed to shower or get out of my pyjamas and I couldn't quite understand where the day had gone. I hadn't been anywhere or done anything except drink wine and be in this room with Harper.

'What do you mean by that? Are you having thoughts of ... of suicide?'

Again, he was calm but this time his words shocked me. 'Suicide? God, no. I would never. How could you even say that?'

'Because you said you can't live like this. And the alternative to living is dying. I have to clarify your meaning. Are you saying you don't want to live, or that you want to live differently?'

'The latter,' I said weakly. Whatever remaining energy was left in my body had been sucked up by that word. How could Andrew even think that I could be so selfish as to end my life, to leave him and Harper to muddle on without me? But there was also this. A secret part of me did wonder if perhaps the pair would be better off and maybe I would, too. My world had reduced to the dark and wet four walls of Harper's nursery and there was

nothing beyond it.

‘Right.’ Andrew got up from his haunches. ‘I’m going to take a few more weeks paternity leave and we are going to do things differently. For starters, this little monster and I are going for a walk every morning at 7 am, and that’s when you’re going to shower and get dressed. Secondly, you’re going to make that baby health centre appointment and get yourself into a mothers’ group.’

‘But they’re bitch-fests. It’s mums trying to one-up each other all the time with how perfect their child is. I can’t take Harper to that.’

‘Maz. You said yourself—something has to change. You need to pull yourself together, and I’m going to help you make it happen. You’re in a rut and it will pass. This,’ he gestured to my state of dishevelment, ‘is not the woman I love. What if anyone else saw you like this? They wouldn’t believe it’s you.’

But it is, I wanted to say. It is me.

*

In the baby health centre, Lorraine kept her eyes on the sheet. ‘The thought of hurting myself has occurred to me quite often, sometimes, hardly ever or never.’ Her gaze stayed downcast, expression neutral. She was giving me space to be honest. *Whatever your answer*, her lack of expression said, *there will be no judgement from me.*

‘Never.’ I spoke firmly. ‘I could never imagine doing anything to hurt myself, because that would hurt Harper.’

‘Good to hear.’ Finally, Seraphina/Lorraine looked up and gave me a smile. ‘We’ll see you back here on Tuesday for mothers’ group.’

18

11 December

Dominic

Margaret is there again at the warehouse. She spots him walking through the doors, waves and smiles.

‘Dominic, so nice to see you again. Any chance you could give me a hand with these boxes? We’ve got a van ready for loading.’

‘Sure.’ He grabs one and follows the sweet, unsuspecting Margaret towards the dock.

He’s been thinking about her ever since the last visit. When she left the warehouse, he had this strange urge to track her, see where she went. Maybe she was going to see her daughter? For a few minutes there, he had actually followed her little Toyota Corolla as it took lefts and rights through the industrial area and emerged to the main road. Margaret indicated left. Dominic’s house was in the complete opposite direction but he also indicated left. What was he doing? What did he expect to get out of this?

Something for Lou, was his thinking. He wanted to take these nuggets of information back to his sister, to present them to her like a cat laying a dead bird at its owner’s feet and say, ‘Here, look what I found out. Marianne is out of jail and I know where her mother lives.’

But he suspects Lou already knows.

At home he’d googled *Does the victim get informed when a prisoner receives parole?* Under the NSW Corrective Services System, a person could officially register as a victim of a crime. Lou would have done this for sure and she would have done it without contemplating Dominic because in her mind she and Tao were the only true victims. Sure, her brother lost his mother and a niece, but he bore some responsibility for what happened. His sister would always consider him one of the perpetrators. According to the Corrective Services website, registered victims were always informed when an offender came up for parole and they were given the opportunity to make a submission as to whether the prisoner should be granted their release.

Dom knew enough about his sister and her grief to understand what her submission would have been. No way should Marianne be out one minute sooner in the community than her sentence directed. She had taken the lives of two people that Lou loved most in this world. Twenty-eight months was barely adequate. A shortened twenty was unconscionable.

Obviously, the parole board had not listened. Dominic could only guess at her anger. White-hot rage wouldn't even come close.

In the end, with thoughts of Lou ticking along in his head and keeping time with his indicator, he'd turned in the opposite direction to which Margaret was headed and drove back to his own home with a stone of dread in his stomach and the sense of having failed his sister yet again. Sitting in the gloom of his apartment he dialled her number. She didn't answer—he didn't expect her to—so he left a stuttering, stumbling, rambling message in which he said he was thinking of her and Tao. Could she please call him? It was important.

Days later, he's still waiting for a call that he knows won't come. After the accident, in those terrible scenes at the hospital, she made it clear she never wanted to see or speak to him ever again and she had stayed firm in her resolve, even through the funerals and the dark months in which their mother's estate had to be sorted. They were co-executors but Lou communicated only through the solicitor.

He missed his mum, that went without saying, and his grief for Baby Rose was a wild and unruly beast that snuck up on him at odd times and rendered him teary and unable to speak. But the one person he missed, really missed, was Lou, because she was still in the world and was one of the very few people who understood what he'd gone through. Last Christmas he'd reached out, to no avail, and Auntie Nic wasn't around because she always travelled to Brisbane to have Christmas with her in-laws so Dom had spent the day at home, eating honey soy Kettle chips and binging *The Sopranos*.

This year is looking much the same, except he'll probably watch *Breaking Bad* because inoperable lung cancer and meth cooking are exactly the uplifting drama he needs.

‘Busy at work I suppose?’ Margaret interrupts his thoughts as she heaves a hamper into the van. ‘Why do people always behave like the world’s going to end at Christmas and everything has to be done before the year evaporates?’

‘That’s true, you know.’

‘Are you going away?’

‘Nope, just at home.’

‘And those friends of yours, they’re definitely hosting you for Christmas Day?’

‘Um … I think so.’ He follows her back inside the warehouse to get another hamper but she stops at the table and fixes him with her cornflower eyes.

‘Dominic, forgive me for being forward but you seem like someone who could really use a family this year. Did you lose someone—a parent—

recently?’

‘My mum, actually. But it was two years ago, now,’ he blurts without thinking. He doesn’t mention Rose because honestly, it’s too painful to mention the death of a baby. People do not know what to say. Plus, if he mentions her to Margaret she’ll definitely put two and two together, and he’s not ready, yet, for her to discover their shared history.

‘I had a feeling that might be the case. Two years isn’t long in terms of the grieving journey.’ Margaret nods and Dominic is momentarily annoyed by the knowing nature of her expression; he’s tempted to tell her the truth so he can wipe the knowingness off her face. But the moment passes. It’s not Margaret’s fault, he reminds himself. None of this is her fault.

‘Had your mum been unwell?’

‘Yes ... for a while.’

She gives him another of those unsuspecting and sympathetic smiles. ‘How about we stop for a cuppa and you can tell me more about her ... if you want to, that is.’ Her face greys and her eyes go vacant as if she’s taking herself back to a place of emotional numbness. ‘I know what it’s like when you lose someone close to you. People act like they never existed. They don’t know what to say. They think they’re upsetting you if they bring it up when the opposite is true. You want to talk about them because it’s the only way you can hang on to any piece of them ... but everyone’s different. You can tell me to go jump in a lake if you like, that it’s none of my business, that’s entirely valid, too. But my husband died decades ago and I still miss him dreadfully at Christmas. All this forced jolliness and joy. Just a reminder of everything you’ve lost.’ She sighs. ‘Sometimes it’s good to get it all off your chest. That’s what works for me, but like I say ... not for everyone.’

While Margaret has been speaking, Dominic has had the most awful feeling that he’s about to cry because in the two years since the accident, barely a single person has spoken to him with such kindness and understanding. A couple of his mates had asked him once or twice how he was faring but they did it in that typical male way, designed to check a box and delve no deeper than the surface. *So, how are you going then, all right?*

The question was almost rhetorical. No one wanted him to say, ‘No, actually, I’m not all right.’ A fact that was confirmed by the relief on their faces when he gave them the answer they wanted to hear: ‘Yeah, nah, I’m good.’

He wasn’t good, he was bloody awful but Margaret looked like the kind of person who might actually be capable of hearing the truth.

Well, some of it.

‘You know what? That would be good. Thank you.’

Now, it’s Margaret’s turn to look relieved. ‘Oh, excellent. I was worried I might have overstepped. My girls say I’m good at that.’ She gestures towards the tearoom. ‘Shall we?’

They make their cups of tea in the kitchenette. Margaret takes care of the bags and hot water while Dominic sources the milk and sugar. With steam

curling into slightly stale air, Margaret blows on the muddy liquid and eyes him over the rim of the cup.

‘So, apart from her family, what else did your mum love?’

‘Cooking,’ says Dominic, eyes roving about the cupboards and sink. ‘She loved cooking, but it was also the thing that tipped us off about her illness.’

‘How so?’ asks Margaret.

Dominic takes another sip of the scalding liquid and allows his mind to spool back.

*

‘Have you noticed anything up with Mum?’

Lou had said it casually while they were drying dishes after one of Dolly’s famous Sunday lunches. It had been her usual feast of three courses—swordfish ceviche for entree, a slow baked lamb shoulder with an Ottolenghi salad for mains, and a generous wedge of bee sting cake for dessert. Dominic was so satisfactorily full that he’d been in danger of nodding off at the dining table before Lou called him into the kitchen to help with the clean-up. From the dining room came filtered sounds of animated conversation between Mum, Lou’s boyfriend Tao, Aunt Nic and Uncle Tony and their favourite cousins—Tabitha and Angela. For an ostensibly sad occasion (celebrating their deceased dad’s birthday) it had been a fun-filled lunch of stories about Dad, political arguments (oldies versus youngies on the merits of same-sex marriage) and delicious food. Now, all Dominic wanted was to creep off down the hallway to his old bedroom with its poster of a sultry Jennifer Lopez smiling down on him and curl up on the single bed for a nap.

Instead, he picked up a soapy roasting pan and stifled a yawn. ‘Anything? How so?’

Lou paused with her hands in the suds. ‘The other day she asked me if I knew what time Dad would be getting home from work.’ ‘Dad? You sure you heard right?’

‘Hmm ... I said *Dad*? and she said *Yes, I’ve got dinner for him in the oven*. And I said, *It might get a little dry, given he died three years ago*.’

‘That’s weird. What did she say to that?’

‘She sort of laughed and said, *Oh, I didn’t mean Dad, I meant Dom.*’

‘That’s feasible I guess.’ But also a bit strange given he hadn’t spoken at all to Mum during the week.

‘And today, when we turned up for lunch, I found her going through the cupboards looking for the plates.’

‘The good ones?’

‘Yep.’

For the entirety of Dominic’s life, the good plates—along with the good cutlery and the silver placemats—had always resided in the dining room sideboard. Never the kitchen. ‘Had she moved them?’

‘They were in the sideboard. Like always.’

‘Maybe she’s just tired. She does tend to run herself ragged.’ ‘Maybe.’ Lou shook her head. ‘I don’t know. Just something to keep an eye on.’

They moved on to other topics—Lou’s new role managing the call centre, Tao’s purchase of a ‘ridiculous’ jet ski, Dom’s ongoing failure to find a girlfriend.

‘You need to watch out, baby bro. It’s cool to be single when you’re a thirty-seven-year-old man, but if you’re forty-seven, it’s just sad. And weird.’

‘It’s not like I’m not trying. I go on dates.’

‘And you run away the minute things get serious.’ Lou snapped off the gloves. ‘You’re a commitment-phobe. You couldn’t even watch the entire series of *Game of Thrones*.’

Dominic flicked the tea towel at her legs. ‘I’m far too mature for such rubbish.’

*

Five years on, that conversation makes him feel sad and stupid. How easily he’d brushed off his sister’s concerns—both about his mother and his own inability to find a mate. And now, here he is—sad, alone and forty-two years old. Lou had seen it all coming. Dominic had seen none of it. A few months after that washing-up conversation, Lou rang him in a state. Their mother had been found wandering in a car park, unable to find her car.

‘Well, she wouldn’t be the first one to have lost her car in one of those places,’ he’d responded mildly, trying to ignore the uptick in his pulse.

‘Dom, she couldn’t even remember what kind it was. The colour, the number plate, nothing. For a while, the guard wasn’t even sure she had a car.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘With me. I’m taking her straight to Doctor Anand. Something’s not right.’

The diagnosis didn’t take long. Once Dianne (her proper name, but she was always Dolly to friends and family) spoke to the doctor about the problems she’d been having with the basics of life, it all came together in a single, blinding word: Alzheimer’s. It was so strange to see their capable, competent mother reduced, at times, to a frightened child. But there’d also be hours where she was completely lucid and articulate and you’d never think for one moment that her brain was shrinking and dying. What frightened their mother most was the idea of moving into a nursing home.

‘I’d rather die than live out my days like a rotting vegetable in one of those places.’ This statement would generally be accompanied by a slap on the table, a shaken fist or a waterfall of tears. Who was this aggressive, highly emotional woman? She bore little resemblance to the mother that Dominic remembered and cherished. The doctors had warned them that personality changes were part and parcel of the condition. Again, Dominic felt his naïveté keenly when he remembered how he’d thought, *Not my mum. Not Dolly. She wouldn’t hurt a fly.*

But of course, she did.

*

For the first year, they'd muddled along with Lou, Dominic and Auntie Nic taking turns to check in on Dolly every day to ensure she had food and that the house was in order. They put Post-it notes on all the cupboards and drawers so she wouldn't get frustrated trying to find things. By mutual consent she stopped driving the car after getting lost one too many times. To remove any temptation, Dominic took care of selling it. She kept up with the things where friends were able to come and give her a lift, like tennis and the community garden. Cooking became a major point of contention. More than once, Dom and Lou had arrived to find a gas flame burning away, thankfully with no saucepan or frypan. But it would only be a matter of time before their mother not only forgot to turn off the flame, but forgot she was cooking altogether. In all aspects of life she was slowing down. She reminded Dominic of a wind-up toy whose spring had peaked. Conversely, their mother's slowing prompted Lou into a hurry-up of sorts.

'Life is so bloody short. We've all just got to get on with it, don't we.'

She got engaged to Tao and with the help of caterers they held the party at home, with their mum slightly mystified by all the people in her house.

At the end of the evening, Auntie Nic had drawn Dominic and Lou into a three-way hug. She'd found Mum in the middle of the road on her last visit. 'Kids, I think this is it. We've all done our best. It's time.'

*

As expected, Dolly hated the aged care facility. 'I want to go home. Please take me home.'

This was how every visit ended and Dominic dreaded it.

'Mum, you are home. This is your room. That's your bed. Your old drawers. All your clothes are here. Remember you chose this place with us?'

To this she would nod, even though Dominic understood she had no recollection of the weeks that she'd spent with him, Auntie Nic and Lou visiting a number of Newcastle care facilities—some more glamorous than others but all of them quite adequate and staffed by seemingly caring, compassionate individuals. The one they chose was fresh, clean, modern and, most importantly, located within a ten-minute drive of her old home which made it convenient for Lou, Nic and Dom to keep up their regular visits. They maintained their rotation, ensuring that Dolly always had one visitor a day—usually timed around a meal to make sure she ate. But the deterioration was like a relentless, creeping tide. Their mother was not their mother any more and the only silver lining in this miserable journey was that Lou and Dom were able to share their grief at what was being lost on a weekly basis. Her memory was like a completed jigsaw being returned to the

box piece by piece. At first it was the short-term that went—what she'd done yesterday, what she'd eaten for lunch, where she'd been in the centre's minibus. Don't even bother asking whether she'd enjoyed the latest episode of *MasterChef*—she would have no memory of having watched it. This left Dominic with a conundrum. So much of their conversation was based on small talk—what they'd been doing, seeing, eating, in recent days. When these questions prompted blank responses, he struggled for alternatives until one day, after a particularly stilted visit, one of the carers gently pulled him aside. 'Some families like to bring books or newspapers to read together. Maybe photo albums. Helps keep the conversation going.'

He could have kissed the carer. Photo albums. Genius. His mother's home had cupboards full of her travels with Dad, so lovingly and painstakingly put together over the years, and almost never looked at.

On the next visit, when the conversation with his mother started to wane, he reached into his satchel for the black and white striped album that featured photos from his parents' 2008 trip to the US. Together they marvelled over the beauty of Central Park, the masses of people in Times Square, his parents beaming beside the Naked Cowboy, then on to New Orleans where the photos mostly focused on the Creole and Cajun feasts of gumbo and jambalaya.

'Oh my goodness, the food in that city,' his mother groaned and clutched the album to her chest like it was a beloved child.

In that moment, she was completely transported to a time and place where Dad was alive and they were consuming the world together. Dominic had never seen her look happier and a very small, minute part of him was grateful that this illness had given them this moment.

*

'Oh my gosh, Dominic, that's so beautiful,' gushes Margaret, her eyes glassy. 'That you had those intimate moments with your mum before she passed.' She takes his hand and squeezes it. 'What a good son you were to her.'

He is brought back to the present by her touch. 'I wasn't, really,' he mumbles. 'I wasn't good enough.'

And that's the truth. In the end he didn't protect her or Rose.

'Oh, but you were. Any mother would be so proud to have a son like you. I know I would be.'

Dominic drops his gaze because his guilt won't allow him to meet those earnest, appreciative eyes.

Margaret continues. 'I know your plans for Christmas are a bit up in the air but I'm wondering if you would seriously consider celebrating with me and my family? It would be our honour to have you as a guest at the table. My girls would love to meet you, and I have these two darling little granddaughters who could use another solid man in their lives. Would you think about it?'

His guilt redoubles. If he says no he will disappoint this very kind woman who has made the invitation out of her spirit of generosity and inclusion. But saying yes is impossible. How can he, in all conscience, celebrate Christmas in the home of the woman who drove, drunk, straight at his mother and niece? But then another thought occurs to him, and this one is strange and dark.

Maybe this is an opportunity?

An opportunity for what?

But the thought has sprouted in his chest and won't go away, so he pats Margaret's hand, thanks her for the kind invitation and says that he'll think about it.

19

Christmas Day

Inspector Tim McKay pauses at the staff entry, hand on his gut. That extra helping of pork crackling last night was a bad idea. Even with two Mylanta under his belt, he'd belched and burped his way through the morning, right up until it was time to go to work.

At the heavy entry door he lets another quiet one go, produces his swipe card and pushes through.

Inside the station is a scene of quiet productivity. Karen, the duty officer he's relieving, is on the phone and signals she'll be free in a moment to do the handover. Most of the office cubicles are empty and Tim goes to the front desk to check out who's where and doing what before he gets the full brief. Christmas isn't a day for office work and pen-pushing. Anyone who's on duty will be out and about, doing the normal round of Christmas Day jobs—random breath testing, follow-up on Christmas Eve burglaries and, as the day wears on and the population gets more and more drunk, domestic violence calls. In his forty-eight Christmases with the force, Tim's worked about half of them. It wasn't so bad until the kids came along and the idea of not celebrating with his two boys, who now have kids of their own, caused his chest to ache in a way he knew wasn't indigestion. Now, they get together on Christmas Eve or the weekend before and everyone's happy. He and Bridget get to see the grandkids and it leaves the daughters-in-law free to see their own families on the big day. Winner-winner pork roast dinner.

‘G'day, boss. Happy Christmas.’ Annabelle, the probationary constable on front desk duty, gives him a cheery grin from beneath her Santa hat. ‘Were you naughty or nice this year?’

Tim lets out a chuckle. He likes a bit of cheek in his junior officers. Being a copper is not a job for shy wallflowers. You've got to have the fight, the passion, the energy. And maybe that's how he knows it's time to retire—more days than not, he thinks how nice it would be to ignore the blue uniform in his cupboard and reach instead for his fishing jacket and waders. He went into the force to help people in their worst moments and to keep the

community safe. He's done that and more. Now it's someone else's turn. How strange will it be, next Christmas, to wake up and know he won't be dealing with any drunk or violent idiots that day, unless it's one of his own sons. But that's not likely. They're good boys. Decent men.

'I reserve the right to silence until I've consulted with my lawyer,' he jests back with Annabelle. Good kid, this one. Smart, gutsy. Big future in the force if she can stick with it. The cops are much better for women compared to when Tim started (let's be frank, it couldn't have been much worse) but there's still a long way to go.

'How's it been today?' he asks, moving to look over her shoulder.

'Pretty crazy.' Annabelle pulls a face. 'You wouldn't believe how many morons go out on Christmas Eve with a house full of expensive presents and the windows left open or a key in a pot plant next to the front door. And then they're shocked when thieves stroll in and take everything that's sitting under the tree. How stupid are these people?'

'Happens every year.' Tim shakes his head. 'Doesn't matter how much we spread the word that thieves don't take a break for Christmas.' He takes a look at the computer dispatch screen. A couple of patrols out on traffic duty, another two attending to reported burglaries, one at a domestic disturbance, another attending a noise complaint and a few undertaking some visibility patrols at a local park that's popular for Christmas lunches.

'Looks like the usual shitshow to me. How long till you finish up?'

'I'm off at 3.'

'Seeing the family?'

'Seeing my mattress more likely.'

'Sounds like a good plan. Rest is key in this job.'

'I know, I know. Self-care. Yada yada.' Annabelle rolls her eyes. 'Put on your own oxygen mask first. But, boss, hang about because I just took a call that you're gonna want to know about.' She clicks into a different screen. 'Intensive care doctor at St Andrews by the name of Callie Kang called us about a suspected DV.'

'Nothing from the ambos? They usually let us know.'

She scrolls down. 'It wasn't a DV call-out. It was for head injuries. A bloke fell down the back stairs of a home in Waratah Heights. Caller reported the patient not breathing. CPR commenced. Ambos zapped him back to life and got him back. He's now in a bad way. Induced coma, under ventilation, unlikely to survive. Doctor says they'll run some more tests but it's not looking good. Life support likely to be switched off once the family gets their head around it.'

'So who's saying it's a DV situation?'

'Someone at the hospital visiting the guy. Doctor says the woman has injuries consistent with violence. She was there when the fall happened.'

'Wasn't mentioned in the triple-0 call?'

'No.' Annabelle taps away at her keyboard. 'I ran a check on the address. Came up with this.'

She swings the screen around and Tim reads the details. 42 Ravenswood Road—home to recent parolee Marianne Antonio.

‘Any breaches?’

‘None. The model parolee so far.’ Annabelle brings up the mugshot and Tim has to blink for a second because it’s so different to what he normally sees. Clean hair. Clean skin. All teeth intact. The kind of woman he’d expect to find teaching his grandkids at preschool.

‘What was the crime?’

‘She’s that woman, the alcoholic who ran over the old lady and her granddaughter in Newcastle a couple of years ago. Made the news. I googled it.’ Annabelle shakes her head. ‘Poor bastards.’

‘Right. Leave it with me.’

When Annabelle nods, her Santa bell jingles but Tim’s mind is already whirring with the next steps he’ll take. For starters, he needs to get someone down to the hospital to talk to the doctor and the injured woman, if she’s still there. Does he also get a crew out to the house, see if it warrants establishing a crime scene? There’s never any harm in being proactive. If this fella dies and there’s a suggestion it’s through anything other than natural causes, there’ll be some kind of coronial investigation and you only get a short window of time to collect the evidence before the scene becomes tainted. It probably already is.

Could it be coincidental that this has happened at the home of a convicted criminal? Not likely. Tim’s been in the force too long to believe in coincidences. He sets off down the hall, his guts still churning, not so much from his meal but from the knowledge that this, his last Christmas on the job, could be one to remember for all the wrong reasons.

20

12 December

Ellinor

Elli wakes with a jolt, confused by the sunlight glaring through the blinds. In London, she rises in the dark, takes the tube in the dark, and leaves work when it's dark. She pokes a finger through the venetians to separate them, make sure she's not dreaming. Mistake. Rays of light burn into her retinas. Seeing stars, she lets the blinds go and flops back to the pillow, tunes in to the sounds of the house. 6 am and action is afoot. High-pitched American accents suggest a cartoon being watched on TV. A few random bangs and thuds indicate breakfast being made. Groans and whistles from inside the walls speak of a shower running. And is that classical music coming from next door? Must be the quirky neighbour that Maz has been talking about.

Her door creaks open. Small shuffling feet. Excited whispers.

‘I think she’s asleep. Her eyes are closed.’

‘Should we see?’

Elli smiles to herself and flings her doona aside. ‘Come here, you little monkeys.’ With whoops and cheers her two nieces come barrelling into the bed like gambolling puppies.

‘Auntie Elli, Auntie Elli. Can we play motorbikes?’ Harper clammers onto Elli’s stomach. ‘I really want to crash and fall off onto the bed.’

‘Are you sick, Auntie Elli?’ Paige holds up the half-empty packet of temazepam and Elli’s muscles contract. Shit. So careless to leave them lying around like that.

‘Nope. They’re just vitamins.’ She swipes the pill packet out of Paige’s hand and shoves it under the pillow, praying the girls are too young to realise that vitamins usually come in bottles and not blister packs.

‘Now, Harps. Climb aboard.’ Elli raises her arms and curls her fingers into fists that Harper will hold as the motorbike’s accelerator and brake, a game she remembers playing with her own uncle, laughing till she cried as she sat on his raised knees, feet on his stomach while he jiggled and pretended to

swerve around corners until she would finally fall off in a laughing heap.

‘Noooo. I want to go first. Please, Auntie Elli. Please.’ Paige tries to shove her sister aside.

‘Paige, don’t do that. Stop.’ Harper tries to fight off her little sister’s advances. ‘You’ll hurt Auntie Elli.’

‘I wanna go first.’ The little girl’s face is screwed tight with determination as she repeatedly shoves her older sister.

‘Paigey, calm. You’ll both get an equal go. Promise,’ says Elli.

‘Me first. Me first. Harper always gets everything.’

Elli sits up on her elbows. ‘That’s not true, Paigey.’

‘It is. You don’t like me as much as you like her.’ Her eyebrows redden and tears sprout in her brown eyes.

‘That’s definitely not true,’ says Elli. ‘I promise you will get just as good a go as Harper, but she did ask first so she gets first go.’

‘It’s okay, Auntie Elli.’ With a solemn face, Harper climbs off. ‘You can go first, Paigey.’

‘Harper, no, I don’t think that’s—’

‘Yay. Thanks, Harps.’ The beaming Paige wastes no time in taking her sister’s spot.

Elli tries once more to get Harper’s attention but the child is now standing by the bed, arms folded and waiting patiently. ‘It’s okay, Auntie Elli. I want Paigey to go first.’

‘Are you sure?’

She nods. ‘Dad says I always have to look after my little sister,’ she shrugs. ‘That’s my job.’

‘C’mon, Auntie Elli.’ Paige tugs her arm. ‘Start your engine.’

My god, thinks Elli. They’re just like we were.

*

The day that baby Maz came home from the hospital, seven-year-old Elli had been out playing bullrush with her mates in the street. The neighbourhood kids were both older and taller yet Elli won every round because she had more determination and smarts in her big toe than most kids had in their whole bodies.

‘Hey, Elli. Your mum and dad are home.’ One of the kids had pointed with excitement at the station wagon pulling into her garage. Excitement, because it meant that someone else would now have a chance to win the game.

Elli was torn between the desire to claim another victory and her urge to meet her new little sister. Would she even like this interloper who’d stretched her mother’s stomach and made her feel so sick? Babies couldn’t run or play or talk. This new kid would be a little jellyfish blob who cried a lot and got carried around all the time—that was the report from her best friend at school, Leon, who only had bad things to say about his baby sister.

‘Elli-dear. Yoohoo. Come in now. Come and see the baby.’ That was Grandma, who’d been looking after her and Dad while Mum was in the hospital. Grandma’s idea of a delicious meal was fried chops and fried lettuce. Elli would not be sorry to see her go. Thankfully Grandpa had not come, too. He reminded her of a scary clown with his floppy limbs and bulging red nose but Mum didn’t like her saying these things.

‘Yeah, Elli. Go and meet your little sister. Give her a big kiss from me,’ crowed Alfie from number 33—he especially hated being beaten in bullrush.

‘You shut up about my sister or I’ll kick you in the shins and don’t think I won’t.’ She jabbed a finger in his face and enjoyed seeing how scared he looked. And yet, it also surprised her. Why was she sticking up for a sister she hadn’t even met? A sister she wasn’t even sure she wanted to meet?

*

Sitting on the couch, her mum cradled a bundle so small that Elli imagined it was more likely a baby possum than a child.

Beside them, Grandma hovered in her apron, hands clasped. ‘Oh, she’s just a darling. Have you ever seen such a pretty baby?’

‘She’s a doll, no doubt about that,’ said Dad with the same expression of joy and wonder he got when his favourite sonata came on the radio. He was different to other dads—more interested in music and art than footy and barbeques. Elli supposed it was because he was English—a *Pom* as the other parents called him.

Only Mum noticed that Elli was in the room. ‘Come here, love. Would you like a cuddle?’

Not really. Bullrush was much more interesting than a bunch of adults cooing like pigeons over something as common as a baby. Still, she did not want to disappoint her parents so she took a spot on the couch and Mum put the pastel-striped bundle into her hands. ‘Just keep her head supported. That’s it. You’re doing it.’

Nestled into Elli’s arms, her little sister yawned and her tiny mouth gaped into a black hole of pink gums and a darting lizard-like tongue. Her eyes blinked slowly but then she opened them wide and her mouth stretched into a smile.

‘Jeffrey, look. She’s smiling at Elli. Get the camera,’ said Mum, shining like a light globe.

‘Could it be wind? She might need burping.’ Grandma’s nose wrinkled. ‘Or a nappy. I can smell something.’

‘No,’ said Mum firmly. ‘It was a smile. Her first smile. And it was for her big sister.’ She leant closer and the familiar lemony smell of her Shalimar perfume washed over Elli like a soothing hug. ‘My two girls,’ she murmured. ‘My two precious girls.’

Marianne’s eyes were now so wide Elli worried they might pop out. ‘Is she all right?’ she whispered. ‘Why is she looking at us like that?’

‘She can only see things that are very close up, like our faces. And she probably recognises your voice from all that time in my tummy. She already knows you’re someone special and she’s going to love you and look up to you, no matter what. You are sisters forever and this little girl needs you to love and protect her, always. Especially when Dad and I aren’t around.’

‘Like, if you go to the shops or something?’

‘Something like that.’

Her sister gave a little cry and her face scrunched like a paper bag. Elli’s insides crunched with fear. ‘What did I do? I didn’t do anything. Mum?’

‘Sh, sh, it’s okay, honey. Just give her a pat on the bottom and shush her like I’m doing. She’s just telling us she’s a bit tired.’

Elli followed her mother’s lead and Marianne’s face resumed its soft and pillow-y smoothness. Her eyelashes rested like miniature feathers against her chubby cheek.

‘See, she’s going to sleep. She feels safe with you, Elli. She knows you’re going to look after her. How does that feel?’

‘It feels ...’ She couldn’t describe what was happening inside her body because it was so many things at once. On one hand, she had that big rushing feeling like she’d just scored a goal in soccer. But she was also a bit scared, the way she got when Mrs Tang called on her in class to answer a maths question and she wasn’t quite sure she was up to the task. And there was this strange heat in her eyes like she was about to cry which was silly because she only cried when she really, really hurt herself. Holding her sister was nothing like having a skinned knee.

‘It feels ... it feels like I’m holding the whole world and it’s a bit scary but it’s also really really cool.’

Mum nodded. ‘That’s it, darling. That’s the love.’

*

From that day forward, Elli was officially her sister’s protector. Baby-Marianne needed her for cuddles and constant dummy-replacement. Toddler-Marianne had a death wish and needed one of Elli’s hands for walking and another for Elli’s speedy swoop-and-scoop manoeuvre to stop her from running towards roads or massive dogs. Preschool-Marianne drove her mad with all her mess and dolls—why did she need to live so much in her imagination? Elli loved her sister but often didn’t like or understand her much at that age. Then, their father died in that awful accident at the beach and Elli wondered if maybe she’d given too much of her focus to Marianne and not enough to her parents. But weren’t they adults who were supposed to look after themselves? Elli cried buckets but then redoubled her efforts into caring for her little sister. Primary-school-Marianne needed her for the school bus and demonstrations of how to knee Ivan Sandler in the groin if he bullied her in the playground. High-school-Marianne needed her for maths homework and advice on the best way to handle the attentions of multiple

suitors, drawn like moths to Maz's flaming combination of golden-haired beauty and angelic musical talent—not that her sister could see any of it. Marianne was strangely lacking in self-confidence and when it came to the male species, she had zero dickhead-detector. In contrast, Elli's moron-antenna was fine-tuned but underutilised; boys were not drawn to her mouse-brown hair and bookish nature, but that was fine—they were idiotic and useless. University-Marianne was tricky. She'd gone to Sydney to study and Elli had secured a good job in a Newcastle law firm. Every night when they spoke on the phone, Elli sensed her sister's loneliness. She seemed to be drinking rather a lot and working her way through all the tradies in Sydney. It wasn't healthy and quite frankly it was a relief when early-twenties-Marianne returned to Newcastle where Elli could keep a closer eye on her drinking and socialising. The succession of tradies did not stop but Elli was at least there to help her pick up the pieces.

Then came Andrew, intelligent, attractive, wise Andrew who fell deeply and madly in love with Marianne, as men tended to do. She had found her safe harbour and Elli had found herself redundant in the role as protector-in-chief. Did it hurt? Of course it bloody did. It wasn't every day that you lost your two best friends in the world, to each other. She could have stopped the relationship in its tracks. Both Andrew and Marianne sought her approval and consent and Elli gave it without question, despite her hesitations about their suitability. Her sister could be highly emotional and Andrew rarely displayed heightened feelings of any kind. How would he cope with Maz's insecurities and constant need for reassurance? It could be tiring and off-putting, but Andrew seemed drawn to her drama in a way that Elli had not anticipated. She'd assumed that because of his sensible nature he'd go for someone like himself, someone more like Elli, but obviously he preferred the yin and yang scenario. He clearly liked to be needed—maybe it fed his ego—and Marianne needed Andrew in a way that Elli did not. But in the end, even Andrew wasn't enough to fill the incomprehensible hole that existed in her sister and could only be filled by alcohol. Quite frankly, it was infuriating. Enraging. Maz had everything—a decent husband, two beautiful children—how could she possibly need a bottle of champagne to get through the day? Yes, covid had been hard but it was hard for everyone. Elli went for months barely seeing a soul, but did she become bosom buddies with the Jimmy Brings delivery man? No, she did not. She did what everyone did: tried (and failed) to learn a new language, posted smug pictures of her sourdough bread and parented her 'starter' with zeal, bought too many face creams and brushed up her Zoom skills until it took her less than a second to find the mute button.

To see her sister wilfully and wantonly destroying her life, one wine at a time, was more than Elli could take. After all those years of nurturing and protecting her, it was ... it was a betrayal. How dare her sister put at risk the very things Elli so desired, all because she was worried the world was going to hell in a handbasket?

*

A squeal of pain brings Elli sharply back to the present. Paige has fallen from the motorbike and writhes in pain on the floor, gripping her ankle and sobbing with excessive volume.

‘Paigey, what is it? Tell me what hurts.’ Harper is by her sister’s side, hand rubbing into her back.

‘Auntie Elli was going too fast. I falled off on the corner.’

Elli launches herself from the bed to kneel by the little girl’s side. ‘I’m so sorry, Paigey. But actually I think you let go. You can’t do that when we’re playing motorbikes.’

‘I didn’t let go. You went too fast.’ She looks up at her big sister, cheeks wet with tears. ‘Why didn’t you catch me?’

‘I ... I don’t know.’ Harper is crestfallen, shoulders slumped.

‘It’s not her fault. It’s not her job to catch you all the time. You have to learn to stay on the bike by yourself,’ says Elli, trying not to sound cross at her niece who is too young to understand how this is a dynamic that will not serve either of them well in the long term.

The door sweeps open. ‘What’s going on in here? Paigey, what happened? What hurts? Oh, my poor baby.’ Maz looks completely harassed. Dark shadows stalk her eyes and her brown locks (Elli’s still not used to them) are frizzed and stringy. She scoops Paige off the floor and cradles her like a baby. ‘I told you two not to wake Auntie Elli. What happened here?’

‘It’s my fault.’ Elli and Harper speak at the same time, the same words.

21

Before

Maz

After the accident, my sister said she blamed covid for my drinking. I did not think this quite true but, to make her feel better, I told her she might be right and relayed the moment that alcohol became my pandemic saviour. It was remote learning that tipped me over the edge, I said. Day four.

*

‘That’s not how we do it. You don’t know anything. I’m not doing it and you can’t make me.’ Paige slammed shut her laptop and raced out the door. ‘I’m going on the swing,’ she bellowed, hair streaming behind her like the tail of a wild hyena.

‘Mummy, the internet’s not working.’ Harper’s lip trembled. ‘Miss Grable will get me in trouble if I’m not online. She said anyone who misses class will get a call to their parents.’ A tear, fat as a raindrop, rolled down her cheek. ‘I don’t want you to get a phone call.’ She flung herself into my legs and I stumbled backward from the force of her distress and banged my head against the cupboard.

‘Ow, fuck.’ I pushed Harper away and rubbed the back of my head. My finger came back red and sticky. ‘Look what you did.’ I showed her the blood. ‘You did this.’

Harper’s eyes screwed up into two wriggling caterpillars and her mouth opened in a silent howl. ‘Mummy, I’m sor-ry. Don’t be mad,’ she sobbed. ‘I’ll get you a bandaid.’

‘No, wait. Harper. Come back. I’ll fix your computer.’

But she fled down the hall, weeping. The next sound was the bathroom door being slammed shut.

Christ. And this was only the first week in a month-long stint of remote learning. I grabbed a tea towel and pressed it to the back of my head.

Ordinarily, I would have used a piece of paper towel but that was yet another thing that had disappeared off the shelves of the supermarket, along with toilet paper, pasta, Panadol, batteries and, bizarrely, taco shells. The world had decided that if we were going to die, then the last meal would have to be Mexican. I ran the towel under the tap and switched on the radio for the 11 am press conference with the Premier.

She sounded more grim than usual. Case numbers were on the rise. The hospitals were being pushed to the limit. Police would issue \$1,000 fines to anyone caught more than five kilometres from home. 'Stay home, social distance. I know it's hard but we're all in this together.'

'Yeah sure,' I mumbled to myself. I was getting sick of that comment. Sure, we were all in the same storm but some were enduring it in five-star luxury cruisers and others were flailing about in dinghies. Elli, for instance, was loving it, holed up by herself with no kids to teach, no commuting or pesky colleagues. Some days, she didn't even bother getting dressed for work.

'You're not lonely?' I'd asked her during one of our daily Zoms.

'Shit, no. I've got plenty of company and it's all at the tap of a screen. I might never leave home again. It's bliss.' For the first time since I could remember, I envied my sister and her solitary lifestyle.

'Hey, what's going on out here?' Andrew appeared from behind the door, his Bluetooth headphones at a skew-whiff angle. 'I'm trying to have a meeting.'

'Sorry.' I switched off the radio. 'Paige had a meltdown over subtraction. Harper says her computer's not working and I hit my head against the cupboard.'

'But you're okay?' He asked but the tone was one of frustration rather than concern. I nodded through stinging eyes. 'Right, then just deal with it,' he said.

I felt scolded, like a child, and then I felt guilty. Andrew didn't have time to help—his focus had to be on keeping his job. All of my piano work had dried up. I couldn't teach face to face and Zoom was out of the question with Paige and Harper by my side all day. The world was in turmoil. The images of mass graves being dug in New York were emblazoned into our brains and every night, the news brought stories of doctors in Italy being forced to decide who received treatment and who was left to die. I fretted over Andrew losing his job, over the kids falling behind socially, academically and emotionally. I was a hopeless teacher to them (or were they bad students?) and remote learning was causing enormous conflict in the house.

When the supermarket delivery arrived on our doorstep, I dispatched the girls to their rooms, donned gloves and a mask and cleaned every single item with antibacterial wipes. Every few minutes, my phone pinged with another message from a WhatsApp group—the kids' class groups or mothers' group—with eager suggestions of helpful learning websites or the best sourdough recipes. On social media, I watched people trying new languages and exercising in their homes to pass the time and I wondered how they had time

to pass. My lockdown was busy, chaotic, stressful. There was always something to worry about, including whether we might die.

Outside, the girls argued on the swing we'd bought to keep them entertained. By the pitch of their voices, there seemed a real possibility that one would soon attack the other. The last thing we needed was a trip to the hospital. I had to get out there and referee. I needed to step up. Andrew would be so angry with me if anything happened.

But instead of going to the backyard, I went to the fridge and unscrewed the cap on a half-drunk bottle of sav blanc. The glass was cool in my palms. I brought it to my lips and drank and drank. And when I finished that first glass, I poured another and the awful knot in my stomach began to loosen until it was nothing more than a limp piece of rope. I closed my eyes. This was exactly what I needed, this release from the fear and anxiety, this numbing of pain. Even the throbbing in my head had diminished. I screwed the cap on the wine and headed into the garden to save the girls.

*

From that day forward wine was my saviour. At first, it was a glass or two at 11 am while the girls were outside having their recess break. I started to look forward to that moment, to count the minutes leading up to it. The mornings dragged but the afternoons were a soft blur. Two glasses became three, then four and then it only seemed sensible to finish the bottle by dinnertime, at which point I had an excuse to open another one.

Andrew didn't even notice. He was so ensconced in his work that he didn't see the flush in my cheeks or my occasional slurring of words. How could he? We didn't talk. The girls were delighted at their far merrier mother, who danced around and sang with them in the afternoons or laid back in the hammock while they swung towards the heavens.

Just until remote learning is over, I told myself. When the girls go back to school and Andrew returns to work, I'll stop. These were desperate times, I rationalised. And desperate times called for desperate measures. This was how I saw my drinking—as a rational response to a totally irrational and bizarre situation. When the emergency ended, so too would my drinking.

But this is not what happened.

The girls went back to school but my anxieties did not ease and my piano teaching work did not recover, leaving me at home for whole stretches of days with nothing but the wine and the news for company. Andrew had chosen to return to the office full time—he said he couldn't concentrate at home, even without the kids there—but Elli was doing a mix of both and we'd developed a routine of meeting up on Tuesday afternoons at a local park so she could hang out with Harper and Paige. Normally, I was careful to contain my drinking on those days, but on this particular Tuesday the news had been worse than usual—a spike in coronavirus cases in Sydney and state-wide restrictions, including in Newcastle, needed to be further tightened. On

one hand, I dreaded a return to remote learning but on the other, I was so lonely at home, felt so useless and disconnected from my family, maybe it would be helpful? I paced the house, hoping for answers but the only way to calm my prattling mind was through the bottle.

By 3 pm, I knew I wasn't fit to drive but needed to see my sister. I was desperate for adult connection. Her humour and rationality were always such a balm to me. Through dulled and heavy fingers, I strapped the girls into the car. I'd downed a coffee to try and quicken my senses but the road was blurry, no matter how many times I blinked.

Even now I can't be sure what happened. Did my foot slip to the accelerator and not the brake? Did I momentarily fall asleep? Whatever it was, I found my body being jerked about and my neck whipping forward and back as the girls' screams filled the car. My vision cleared to reveal our bonnet, a crumpled mess against a tree. I panicked. I couldn't call Andrew. He'd never forgive me. Instead, I phoned Elli. Within minutes, she was by my side, comforting the girls and telling them to sit on the grass while she sorted things out.

'Maz, what the hell? You're drunk. You could have killed your own daughters. What's wrong with you?'

My sister's outrage, her disgust, were palpable. The alcohol was still in my system but the numbing buzz had settled into a boulder of dread in my stomach.

I begged her not to tell Andrew. 'He'll leave me. I'll lose the girls. You know what he's like.'

Our marriage was in a tricky spot. Andrew and I were becoming more and more distant. Recently, he'd taken to rebuking me for my excess wine consumption but not once had he asked why it was happening. In his practical, lawyerly mind, my drinking was a frivolous habit that made no rational sense. I think he saw it as selfish or perhaps even immoral. He'd given me everything I'd ever professed to want—marriage, family, a home. Why wasn't it enough? Why did I need to drink myself silly?

It was a question I asked myself every time I unscrewed the cap. What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I control my cravings and anxieties? It wasn't like this pandemic was tougher on me than anyone else. If anything I was lucky—I had a happy, healthy family under my roof. But for how long? If Andrew knew that I had risked our children's lives by driving drunk, I could lose them. Their safety would always take top priority, as it should. A parent's love for a child is titanium-strength and unconditional. The same cannot be said of marital love.

As I begged Elli to keep quiet about my drunken crash, she had stared at me, incredulous. But I could see my words were starting to hit the right note. She knew Andrew and knew I was right.

'Just. Shush.' She took me by the shoulders. 'I won't tell him.' Elli spoke through gritted teeth. 'But you need to get help. You need to see a doctor.'

And I did.

Through a computer screen two days later, I had my first ever telehealth consult and outlined all my fears and anxieties. What would happen if the girls got covid, or Mum or Andrew? And what about my career—would I ever get to work again? Would the world survive this?

The GP nodded as if she had heard this many times. She looked as frazzled and flustered as I felt. A frontline worker suffering under the weight of need. Within minutes I had a prescription for sedatives sitting in my text messages.

I had not mentioned my drinking.

22

13 December

Margaret

She arrives half an hour early to the restaurant—one of Sydney’s best. It’s possible she drove too fast on the freeway but that was the excitement. Her girls, together again. Her family reunited.

From the glamorous foyer with its huge central table festooned in lilies and orchids, she’s shown to her seat by a young man with a moustache and long hair tied into a bun. Too much hair, Margaret decides. Show-off.

He pulls back her seat and she settles into the chic wicker chair. The restaurant sits perched over the harbour and it’s one of those knockout Sydney days—all deep blues, stark whites and a toasty sun.

‘And would you care for a drink while you wait for your guests?’ From behind his leather apron, the waiter presents her with a wine list and Margaret pauses before taking it and perusing quickly. Could she? Gosh, she wants to. Just a settler. Take the edge off. Who could blame her for the rush of excited nervousness coursing through her veins? She has dreamt, for months, of this moment—she, Elli and Maz all together again. Her two precious girls within touching distance. The joy should be straightforward. It will be straightforward if she has some alcohol running through her veins to get rid of her pesky nerves.

But what if the girls arrive early? What if they see the drink on the bill? She can’t risk it.

‘Just a mineral water, thanks.’

She takes the napkin and puts it on her lap so that her hands have something to play with as she waits. She admires the hanging plants, the tasteful blond-wood furniture, the rattan pendant lights. The wicker chair is comfortable but Margaret is finding it difficult to sit still. When the mineral water arrives on her table, she tries to imagine it’s vodka. Tries to conjure that feeling of numbness and relaxation sweeping over her like a breeze, her legs turning to butter.

But much as Margaret is good at pretending, even this is a step too far. The butterflies in her stomach are more frenzied than ever. Why is she so nervous?

Because it's time to tell the truth.

Oh hush now. That's the nerves talking. This is not the time at all. This is her reunion lunch with her two girls. This is a day for happiness, not dredging up the past.

But it's not the past. You'll always be an alcoholic.

Her conscience has been telling her this a lot lately. She wishes it would shut up but the voice has only been getting louder and louder.

She's kept her secret for three decades. She expected to go to the grave with it, but Maz's accident had made her think again. Margie had no clue of the extent of her daughter's drinking problem and how long it had been going on for (years, it seemed), which only served to suggest that Margaret's lying had been for nothing and maybe the truth might have been the thing to save her daughter. But how was she to know? And what does she do with the secret now? She'd thought hiding it to be the best approach. She had a father who drank and a grandfather who also indulged at any opportunity. The alcoholism was in the genes and Margaret succumbed just as the previous generations of her family had succumbed. It was a family curse and when Jeffrey died, Margaret decided the curse would end with her. Marianne and Ellinor would grow up in a house without alcohol or a father. Drinking would not be normalised in the way it had been for Margaret. Even so, Marianne had found her way to the bottle—nurture was no match for nature. Should Margie have told her daughter about the family curse when the accident happened? In hindsight, perhaps. It could have helped Marianne understand her condition more fully, and perhaps lessened her sense of responsibility. Then again, she might also be enraged that her mother had kept it secret all those years. Would their relationship even survive such a revelation? Margaret could not take the chance at such a fraught time. She had to preserve their relationship at all costs. Maz needed her.

The waiter's back and he refills her mineral water. 'Are we celebrating today? Birthday? Anniversary?'

'Reunion, of sorts. My two daughters. They've ... They've been away for quite some time and this is our first catch-up in nearly two years.'

'Sounds like it calls for a special bottle of bubbles, we have—'

'No.' She says the word too firmly and the waiter looks startled. 'I'm sorry. None of us will be drinking, so please don't ask. We'll all have mineral water. Maybe a soft drink.'

The waiter nods. 'No problem. We have a selection of mocktails if you'd care to take a look.'

She's politely perusing the list of overpriced cordials (*Mocktails. Really.*) when her daughters walk through the door. Her heart produces a Pavlovian pulse of joy—these are her girls and they are here!—but that first impulse is snuffed out like a birthday candle. Both look wan and exhausted. Neither

smiles. Still, it's them. Her flesh and blood.

'You're here, you're actually here,' she whispers and pulls them, one in each arm, to her side.

As promised, the waiter doesn't offer them a wine list and instead pours from the bottle of mineral water at the table. Margaret enquires after Ellinor's flight and how she's feeling, though the constant yawning and deep purple shadows around her eyes barely make it a question worth asking. Marianne, too, is subdued and when Ellinor excuses herself to use the toilet, Margaret leans in.

'Is everything all right? You're looking rather peaky.'

'Not sleeping so well,' says her daughter with a weak smile. 'Lots on my mind. I've been having ... memories.'

So, Andrew was right. There's not much that gets past her clever son-in-law. This isn't good. The past is such a pain. 'What kind of memories?'

'Visions from the day of the accident. I ... I saw someone, a hypnotherapist. Andrew doesn't know. But ... she helped. I think there's more there but I go round and round and—' She flexes her hands. 'Nothing.'

'Are you sure that's healthy, darling? You have every right to move on with your life.'

'I ... I don't think that's possible.'

'For the sake of those little girls, it has to be. You cannot live in the past. For them, you have to move forward.' She takes her daughter's hand to reinforce the point. Does she tell her now? Is she ready to hear the truth? Is Margie ready to bear the brunt of her anger for having concealed it for so long?

She swallows, hard. 'How are the girls? Still happy at the new school?'

'They're good. Still enjoying it. I met some of the other mothers at a costume-making thing. They seem okay.'

'Just okay?'

'I—I thought one of them recognised me but ... so far, so good. I'm actually giving her daughter a piano lesson.'

Margaret nods. She's well aware that Marianne had a vague hope that the move to a new area and a new school would give her a form of freedom that hadn't been possible back in Newcastle. But Margaret had always thought it slightly naïve. Marianne's accident was big news. Everything was so public these days and much as Margaret was not heavily engaged with the digital world, she was well aware of its pervasiveness. A person's history was available at the click of a few buttons. Thank goodness it hadn't been around when Jeffrey died. How different things might have been.

'Even if they do find out, you've served your time and paid your penalty. What more can you do?'

'They'll hold it against the girls.'

Oh, the pain on her daughter's face. Margie understands exactly how it feels to inflict grave and unintended consequences on your children. Guilt barely comes close. It's soul-crushing.

Margie leans over, takes her daughter's chin in her hands. 'I know you, Marianne, and I love you and I'm proud of you. Yes, there will be people who won't forgive you. That's life. But the most important thing here is that you forgive yourself. That's the best example you can set for those girls of yours and it's the best way to truly atone for what you did—to be a present and loving mother for those two little girls. They need you.'

'I'm trying. But I can't do that until I know, for sure, exactly what I did that day.'

'But you do know. Andrew has told you.'

'Yes, but it's not real to me, in here.' She clutches a fist to her chest. 'I don't know,' she says miserably. 'Maybe I am in denial?'

'Denial about what?' Ellinor is back and she sits with a tired sigh in her chair. 'The fact that Christmas is less than two weeks away?'

Damn, Elli's timing is terrible. Margie still had more to say but now the moment is lost.

'Don't remind me,' says Marianne. 'I've got a to-do list as long as my arm.'

'Anything I can do to make it easier? Have you got bonbons? I could get them for you?'

'Thanks, Mum. But we're good for bonbons.'

'The turkey then? Or vegetables? Maybe a salad or two? I can do anything. Anything at all. And you don't mind me bringing my friend from the charity?'

Dominic. Yes. It's a risk but seeing Marianne in this state makes Margaret think it's a risk worth taking. She can't say the invitation was entirely planned, but he looked so forlorn that it popped out, almost instinctively. It's what she would have done for anyone in such a sad situation. But Dominic wasn't anyone and in a split second she remembered exactly who he was. Could she withdraw the invitation? Why on earth did he say yes? She has spent the past two days mulling it over. What does he want out of meeting with the woman who killed his mother and niece? All she has concluded is that whatever his intent, it's not nefarious. A man who speaks with such love and sadness about his mother can only be a decent human being. Maybe it's curiosity that motivates him to meet Marianne, maybe it's to help him move on? Whatever the case, she can only think that fate has played a role in bringing them together. This is meant to be and that's why the words popped out of her and that's why he said yes. The universe is pushing them together. It's the right thing for Marianne and Dominic to meet and Christmas is actually the perfect opportunity—a day when everyone will be in a forgiving mood. Margie needs to think more on exactly how the day will play out—does she tell Dominic before the lunch that she knows who he is? Does she tell Maz? No. That might scare them both and provide a chance to pull out. Margie will need to use the element of surprise. At some point, maybe after dessert, she'll pull Dominic and Marianne aside for a private chat. She'll mediate their conversation, convince Dominic that her daughter is worthy of forgiveness. It will help, she's convinced. Her daughter desperately needs

some kind of intervention or circuit breaker.

‘So, is this year’s Christmas orphan a weirdo?’ says Elli.

‘Ellinor,’ Margaret reprimands. Has her elder child always been this spiky?

‘Remember the gardener, Jonathon?’

A cramp forks through Margie’s chest at the embarrassing memory. Damn alcohol. ‘He’s nothing like Jonathon. He’s an optometrist. You’ll both like him. But please, Marianne, let me help you by bringing something. A cheese platter, perhaps?’

Marianne puts her hand on her mother’s arm. ‘Mum, it’s fine. You’re a guest. I want to do this. I need it, if that makes sense.’

Margaret nods and a gloomy pall settles over the trio. This is not how she had pictured the lunch. Not at all. She’d imagined the three of them talking and laughing for hours, just like they used to, before the accident. But Marianne is clearly out of sorts and Ellinor is in danger of falling asleep at the table.

Her elder child stifles another yawn. ‘Sorry. Jet lag’s kicked in.’

‘Should we postpone? I could get the waiter to box up the food and we can take it home?’

‘No, Mum. Definitely not.’ Now it’s Ellinor’s turn to take her hand and squeeze. ‘I’m not going anywhere.’

Another silence settles over the table and Marianne gives Ellinor a quick sideways glance. ‘So, Elli’s got some news.’

‘Do I?’

‘The appointment. The clinic.’

‘I wouldn’t say it’s news. It’s just something I’m doing.’

‘What appointment? What clinic?’ asks Margaret.

‘It’s with an IVF clinic here in Sydney. I want to ... explore my options.’

‘For a baby?’ Margaret asks the most obvious question but there are plenty more lurking beneath. Why now? Who would be the father? Isn’t she too old? But Margaret knows better than to ask. Questions are like arrows in the parental quiver. There’s no point in firing at will for all you end up with is an empty sack, no information, and a very cross child.

‘Like I said, it’s not big news. I wouldn’t be running out and buying the baby clothes. If you believe what you read on the internet, I’d say my chances of conceiving are next to zero. But—’ She shrugs. ‘I want to know I’ve tried.’

‘Can you imagine—a baby in the family? The girls would go wild to have a younger cousin.’ Marianne’s eyes are bright and shining and her emotional shift is, frankly, disconcerting. What is going on with her? She can’t be drinking again, can she? Her younger daughter goes on. ‘It’s exactly what this family needs. A little bundle of hope. Don’t you think, Mum?’

Margaret’s not at all sure about this baby idea. How would Elli manage on her own?

‘I think that whatever makes Elli happy makes me happy, too.’

‘You think it’s a bad idea.’ Elli folds her arms.

‘No, I’m surprised, that’s all. I didn’t know it was what you wanted but I’m delighted to hear that you want to be a mother. It’s the best thing you’ll ever do.’

But as she looks from one unhappy daughter to the other, Margaret isn’t sure that’s the truth.

23

16 December

Dominic

He pulls into a parking spot and gives himself a moment to observe the harbour view. Bloody hell. Why did she choose here?

He feeds the meter and wanders down towards the water where he stops again. Takes in the sun fizzing with light like a dissolving Berocca tablet and the sea, a sparkling sheet of diamonds. The Sydney Harbour Bridge towers overhead—all steel and shadows and occasional creaks. It's still odd to think that his sister lives in this megalopolis. He doesn't get to Sydney often but when he does he's always surprised by the sheer size of it—the CBD that teems with people all rushing past each other. You'd never run into anyone you know.

And maybe that's why Lou's here. It was only through a random browse of a real estate website that he discovered her house was up for sale. When he messaged her he got a curt response.

Moving to Sydney. Too many memories here. L

Behind him comes a mechanical rumbling, the sound of metal on metal, then high shrieks of human terror. His skin flares with goosebumps and he keeps his back turned to that awful clown smile and manic eyes. Theme parks give him the creeps, especially this one. *Just for fun*. Yeah, sure. Fun for who? The last time he came here he was fifteen years old. It was his birthday, his stutter was slightly under control and he finally had some people he could loosely classify as 'friends'. For once, Mum had splurged and allowed him to ask five mates for a road trip to Sydney and an afternoon of thrills. He'd never been to Luna Park before. Never been to any theme park before. But after a sustained campaign of begging, including monologues in which he bemoaned how friendless he'd always felt at school and how a cool party might make his 'friends' accept him more, his parents gave in.

Dom had hated every second.

'Did you know about the fire here?' said his mate, Arthur, as they stood in

line for the Tango Train. Dom shrugged. He knew nothing and wasn't sure he wanted to but Arthur went on. 'Killed seven people on the Ghost Train.'

Dom's stomach twisted. He hated all things ghost related. How could his friend be so nonchalant? 'W-w-w-when was that?'

'Ages ago, before we were born. Dad told me about it. Four of them were thirteen-year-old boys, mates on an outing, like us. Fake fireplace actually burst into real flames and they couldn't get out 'cause of the dark. Bit of a shame,' he sighed. 'I love a ghost train.'

Dom started to breathe fast. His gut was a basket of snakes. How terrifying for those boys, surrounded by ghouls and cobwebs, screaming for their lives and trapped in a fiery dark ride from hell.

Seated on the Tango Train, the attendant had brought down the steel bar over his lap and a wash of saliva swamped Dom's mouth. The ride was a blur of flashing lights and dizzying spins with centrifugal force that pressed on his lungs, starved him of air. The spray of vomit was spectacular in its reach and stench. Shrieks of terrified delight shifted in tone to disgusted horror. 'Stop the ride,' one of his mates yelled. 'Dom's chucked.'

His stutter came back with a vengeance. 'I'm s-s-s-so s-s-s-sorry.'

Oh, the shame of those following minutes and hours. The humiliation of the train being stopped, the mops being sought, the sideways stares in the bathroom as his mates and people he'd never met stuck their heads in less-than-hygienic basins to wash off clods of Dom's intestinal contents. So much carrot. So much disgust. There was no way he was getting on another ride, but his parents weren't due for another two hours and so he trudged after his friends from ride to ride as they tested their bravery again and again on wilder and more terrifying rides and never found it wanting.

'So, how was it? Did you have fun?' His mum's smile had been almost as wide as the park's loony entrance figure. When he quietly told her what happened she'd wrapped him in a hug and said she was sorry. 'I think it was partly my fault, I should have known better,' she said into his pukey hair, and he felt more okay about it until they were in the car on the way back to Newcastle when, without comment, she wound down the window in the car to let the vomit fumes escape. At home his sister fell about the floor laughing at Dom's description of the scene in the bathroom, grown men contorting their necks at odd angles to dry their hair under the hand dryer.

'Oh my god, that's hilarious.' She'd shaken her head, eyes streaming. 'You idiot.'

But on the school bus on Monday morning, when one of his mates greeted him with a taunt—'Hey, look. It's Luna-Puke'—Lou had taken the kid aside and threatened to punch him, and anyone else who ever brought it up again. No one did. Even though she was two years younger than Dominic, Lou was tall and smart and beautiful. All the things that terrified pubescent and pre-pubescent males. The story entered into family folklore and after a few years (ie once he'd left school) he could also laugh about it because time always softened the sharp edges of disaster.

Well, almost always.

Now, standing in front of the café that Lou has nominated, a café within spitting distance of the theme park, it occurs to him that she has chosen this place very deliberately, to shame him.

Whatever. That's okay. His sister has earnt the right to do that. The fact she's agreed to meet him at all is a welcome shock. Lou could have asked to meet him at the top of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and he would have found a way to get there, despite his extreme fear of heights and that awful, awful feeling he gets of wanting to jump—a feeling he knows is common to many but makes no rational sense. Is it the allure of flying freely through the air? Or the terror of knowing it can only end in certain death? For Dom, it's the fear of experiencing a moment of thoughtless madness, of taking leave of his senses and experiencing instantaneous regret.

And maybe it's driven by personal experience. He does know what it's like to experience that kind of life-ending regret. He is capable of moments of thoughtless madness.

‘Dom.’

He's been staring too long at the Luna Park entrance, ruminating on its wonky, piano-key teeth and imagining himself splattering from a great height into Sydney Harbour. So the touch to his shoulder is like an electric shock that makes him jerk.

‘Jesus. What is your problem? You're such a drama queen.’ His sister glares, hands on hips.

‘Sorry. You just—’ *Scared the shit out of me.* ‘I'm sorry. I didn't mean it.’

Without breaking gaze, Lou puts a protective hand over her belly and rubs in a circle. The motion is as instinctive as breathing. ‘You should be.’

‘You're pregnant?’ he blurts.

‘No shit, Sherlock.’ Her hand drops to her side. ‘But don't think this changes anything.’

Via unspoken agreement, they wander slowly along the boardwalk, sandwiched between the theme park and the harbour. The sun beats down. Seagulls patrol for chips. The rollercoasters rattle away and the thrillseekers scream like they're being tortured.

‘I hate this place,’ he mutters in an exhalation of breath that's not designed to be heard. He just needs to expel some nerves because he hasn't a fucking clue how to start this conversation.

‘Nothing new there.’ His sister's tone is as sympathetic and yielding as flint. ‘You were always such a scaredy-cat.’

‘I did go bungy jumping. That time in Cairns.’ Why is he bothering to fight her on this? He has always been afraid of things, and not just heights (acrophobia). There's his fear of emotional intimacy (philophobia). Death (thanotophobia). Spiders (arachnophobia). Balloons (globophobia). And a strange disgust, that borders on fear, of belly buttons (omphalophobia). But perhaps his great fear is having a phobia for which there is no pathological descriptor, like the one he's experiencing right now—the fear of once again

having failed his sister.

‘They had to basically push you off,’ Lou scoffs. ‘You only did it because Mum and Dad had paid and there were no change-of-mind refunds.’

He lets the comment slide over him. Not flattering, but all true. This is the thing with his sister, with anyone who knows you intimately: they know the flaws, the soft underbelly, the tickly bit that makes your paws kick uncontrollably. His mum used to say this was the glory of relationships—to be loved in spite of all one’s faults was a wondrous thing. But there is a flip side—a person can know your faults and decide they don’t love you at all.

They take more steps, the shrieks begin to fade and give way to the clanking halyards of the yachts that bob about in Lavender Bay.

‘So, what’s she like?’ Lou frowns, stares at the ground and her feet moving left-right, left-right.

‘Margaret? She’s ...’ He has to think about this. What Lou wants him to say is that she is a monster. The devil who sired devil-spawn. But his sister hates being lied to. ‘She’s nice. Kind and sweet. Maternal.’

‘How the hell did you meet?’

‘I’ve been volunteering for the Flame Foundation. Putting hampers together. Margaret works there, too.’

‘How very decent of you both,’ she says. ‘Boxing up your guilty consciences in packages for the poor, are we?’

He lets the comment hang. A few years back, he did a wine appreciation course where the sommelier told him that even the most bitter of wines could sometimes be redeemed by decanting and allowing the mixture to breathe. This is what he wants for his sister. It must be so exhausting for her to be angry at absolutely everyone. She can’t want her child to be born into that kind of toxicity, surely?

‘Sorry,’ she sighs. ‘I’m being a bitch.’ She rubs her belly again. ‘This little firecracker insists on 3 am dance parties every night.’

‘Like mother, like child. You loved a rave, back in the day.’

She gives him a look. ‘But I didn’t jump on Mum’s bladder to get my jollies.’

He can’t help but smile at the visual. ‘She probably would have let you, if you asked.’

‘You’re probably right.’ She nudges his shoulder with her own and they keep walking.

‘Do you know what you’re having?’

‘I think it’s a human.’

‘You know what I mean.’

‘It’s a girl. Another girl.’

‘Oh.’ Why did he want her to say it was a boy? Is it because he wants this child to be completely different to Rose? A totally fresh start with no ghosts of the past? Well, that’s ridiculous. As if anything as insubstantial as a penis could wipe away all reminders of the daughter who passed.

‘How’s Tao?’

‘Fine. Terrified. Panic-buying at Ikea. The usual.’

‘Is that why you came today? To tell me about the baby?’

Maybe his sister does not want her bitterness to seep through the placenta and inhabit her baby’s bloodstream for life. Dom imagines the child, pink-skinned and gummy, air-kicks visible through the slats of the cot with the unpronounceable Swedish name. His arms ache at the idea of scooping her up into her arms, like he used to with Rose, and making her squeal with delight at the feel of his stubbly cheek against her marshmallow skin.

‘No.’

The door slams on his hope.

‘Okay, so why did you agree to meet with me? You already knew that Marianne was being released early from prison.’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you write an objection?’

Her glance is withering. ‘What do you think?’ There’s a bench seat on the boardwalk and Lou lowers herself, one hand supporting her back. She grimaces with discomfort. ‘I came because it sounded in your message like you wanted to make up for what you’d done. Like you wanted my forgiveness.’

‘I’ve always wanted that.’

‘But you’ve never had the means to obtain it.’

Dom stops. Turns to his sister. ‘Lou, we’ve talked about this before. You know I would do anything. Anything to make up for what I did that day.’ His voice cracks. If he could swap his own life for Rose’s or his mother’s, he would, in a heartbeat. But what devastates him most about this plan is not the idea of dying, but the fact it would achieve so little. ‘We both know that nothing can bring them back.’

‘No,’ she says slowly, and there’s something in her eyes that wasn’t there before. ‘But we can make sure that drunk woman never hurts another child ever again.’

‘Lou, I don’t understand. How are we supposed to do that?’

‘You’re going to see her at Christmas, aren’t you?’ The dullness, the coldness, have been replaced by a glint that reminds him of sun shining off a knife blade. She leans in, not blinking. ‘So I think you know exactly. You want to make things up to me? Well maybe this is your chance. The question is: do you, for once in your life, have the guts to do it?’

Dom sits back and the slats of the bench dig hard into his spine. And maybe he’s imagining it, or maybe the breeze that’s struck up is carrying the sound, but he’s sure he can hear thrillseekers shrieking for their lives.

24

19 December

Marianne

On the way to the church for the end-of-school nativity concert, Paige and Harper sit in the back seat of the car and sing ‘We Wish You a Merry Christmas’ until it becomes so repetitive that Andrew and I beg them to stop, at which point Paige starts up a monologue where she rattles off names of the nice teachers who’ll be there tonight, and the horrible ones who we should avoid at all costs.

‘Mrs David always wears a mask because she says we’re full of germs.’ Paige makes a face. ‘But she’s the one always coughing and sneezing. So gross.’

I attempt a half-hearted reprimand but have little energy beyond a ‘that’s not very nice’ statement. We’ve made it to the end of term. The presents are nearly all wrapped and hidden in the garage. Elli’s gone to Newcastle for a couple of days to spend more time with Mum, I’ve unpacked nearly all our boxes now so the house looks as good as it can and Andrew’s promised an all-out assault on the back deck and overgrown garden. The final hurdle is the school nativity. After that, we have six weeks of freedom from drop-offs, pick-ups, homework, lunches and, most importantly, a reprieve from prying school mums. If we can just get through this without anyone working out who I am, I feel like we’ll be okay. By first term next year, we’ll no longer be ‘the new family’ and curiosity in us will fade to nothing. I can barely believe I got through the piano lesson with Luna. She’s a nice enough kid and only needed a few pointers in the right direction where some trickier chords were tripping her up. Jamila couldn’t have been more grateful and when I was leaving it occurred to me that I’d enjoyed myself. Maybe next year, I’ll take the leap and get back into teaching or at least try to get a working with children check. Andrew’s read the conditions and seems to think that my crime doesn’t fall under the list that would exclude me.

This is what I tell myself as we park outside the church into which flows

an endless stream of sheep, shepherds and angels. Inside, almost all the seats are filled and the atmosphere is heavy with nerves, excitement and mid-December heat. I kiss the girls on the nose and wish them good luck before they run off to find their teachers. Up on the altar, a teacher has pressed 'play' on the stereo system and the Year Two angels are belting out a warm-up version of 'Silent Night' with the gusto of kids who are high on the excitement of knowing that Santa is a week away from crossing their doorstep and that all maths homework is officially done for the year. Taped music? The twang of it grates at my ears. From the altar, Paige catches my eye and gives me an angelic wave. I return it and her smile becomes face-crackingly wide, to the point where my eyes warm with emotion. She's so happy.

'Oh, Marianne, hi, how are you? I was hoping I'd see you again.'

Great. Andrew's managed to find us a spot sitting right next to Jamila, who proceeds to introduce me to her husband, a non-smiling man in a navy business suit with his tie removed and an expression that reads *I'd rather be anywhere but here right now*.

Jamila leans in. 'My Luna loved her lesson with you, and she's taken a real liking to your Paige. How are you placed for a play date next week? Always a challenge to keep them occupied in the holidays.' She does air-quotes around the word 'holidays' and rolls her eyes.

My brain freezes. There's only one word that comes to mind and that's a firm no. We got through the lesson, sure, but Jamila and I didn't get much chance to talk. What if she starts asking questions? What if she pursues this idea that I'm familiar to her?

If Jamila has any inkling about the truth, she won't encourage a friendship between her daughter and mine. No parent in their right mind would want that kind of risk in their lives and I know this because if the shoe was on the other foot, that's exactly how I would be.

'Um, well, thank you—'

I'm interrupted by the first strains of 'O Come All Ye Faithful'.

'We'll speak later,' I whisper, clasping my sweaty hands together and pretending to turn my full attention towards the miniature Mary on the altar, lamenting her strange and miraculous pregnancy. When it's Harper's turn to take to the stage she gives 'We Three Kings' her all, with an elaborate show of effort in the dance parts which largely consist of calmly flapped arms and endless prayer gestures.

I wish Elli were here so we could have a giggle together about the strangeness of the whole scenario. In the past week since my sister's arrived, I've laughed more than in the entire time since we moved to Sydney. The house feels lighter, somehow. She's always joking around with the girls and helps with their reading and homework which gives me more time for the chores of making dinner and tidying up. Sometimes, though, when she's hanging out with the girls in the living room, I'll make myself a cup of tea and just sit and listen.

‘Auntie Elli, why don’t you have babies?’ I heard Harper ask her the other day. My first instinct was to leap up and admonish my daughter for such a personal and insensitive question. But before I could move, Elli was talking.

‘Because I hate them. I hate all children, don’t you know? You’re awful and it’s my job to tickle you to death.’

The girls squealed and I visualised Elli tickling them with her ‘scary’ fingers.

‘You don’t hate us. You don’t,’ shrieked Harper. ‘You love us.’

‘Oh, no I don’t. You’re horrible. Stinky and awful. Come here so I can tickle you to death.’

‘Nooooo,’ shouted Paige with delight. ‘Don’t tickle me.’

That was Elli’s go-to, deflecting serious questions with humour. Earlier in the week, I’d gently asked whether she’d met anyone ‘interesting’ lately in London.

‘There’s no one interesting in London. They’re all crashing bores.’

‘You know what I mean. No one special then?’ Of everything I want most in the world, it is for Elli to find love with a person who truly appreciates her for the wonderful human she is. Much as I 100 per cent support her pursuing the IVF route to parenthood, I can’t help hoping for the fairytale—love, marriage, babies.

‘I’m thinking of getting a dog.’ She’d taken Ned into her lap and scratched him under the chin. ‘More fun. Less mess.’

‘And a baby?’

‘Maybe.’ She’d made a face.

‘You do have to pick up after them.’

‘Same with a man.’

‘I meant the poop.’

‘Hang around long enough and you probably end up doing that with a man, too.’

‘You’re not going to give me a straight answer, are you?’

‘I prefer wobbly ones.’

Later, I’d raised it with Andrew and asked if it was something he could talk to her about. Maybe she’d be more comfortable talking to someone who cared about her but wasn’t quite so invested in her happiness.

‘Me? Talk to Elli about her love life?’ His eyebrows had shot up so far they were almost touching his hairline.

‘What? You’re friends. Or you used to be.’

‘Not like that. Never like that. It was just work, that’s all.’

The vehemence of his response caught me off guard. I adored my sister and I’d always considered myself fortunate to have a husband who saw what I saw—her humour, her intelligence, her quirkiness. Why was he saying that it had only ever been a collegial relationship? Sure, it was a while since they’d worked in an office side by side but they’d pulled together so hard after the accident, organising care for the kids and my legal representation.

‘You don’t deserve to go to jail for this,’ he’d kept saying. ‘You just don’t.’

That woman stepped straight out in front of you. There was no time to react. No one could have avoided her.'

I didn't agree—alcohol had clearly dulled my reflexes—but neither did I speak up, not when he was working so hard to keep me out of jail. It would have been churlish to tell him not to bother, even though that's exactly how I felt. But I know he sensed my reluctance to talk about the case, even when the girls were tucked up in bed, because those were the times he sought out Elli. How many nights had I walked in on them, heads bowed together at the kitchen table as they worked through statements and submissions. When I told them I would be pleading guilty, I think I broke both their hearts.

After the sentencing, Elli saw me once in prison—a stilted visit where she struggled to make eye contact as she told me about the London job offer. She was moving away because she couldn't stand to see me locked up. She felt she'd failed me, which was ridiculous because she'd done nothing but help.

'It's okay, Elli. Honestly, it's not as bad as you think here. I'll be fine. You need to do this. I want you to do this. Put yourself first for once.'

Sitting in the garden of the correctional centre, I'd taken her hand in mine. Overhead, the blue sky was infinite and in the paddock next to us the dairy cattle let out the occasional moo. I'd settled into corrections centre life far more easily than I'd imagined. I had a job in the dairy where there were no gates, no barbed wire, nothing at all to stop you walking right out the door—except that you would almost certainly be tracked down, arrested, and put into a higher security facility where the conditions were far more stringent. Most of the women here had mothers and grandmothers who'd been in prison. Most had substance abuse problems that had passed down the generations. These women were here because, in the eyes of the law, they had wilfully and intentionally committed a crime. But after only a matter of weeks, I understood that most of them were here through circumstances into which they were born or found themselves, and while they knew their actions to be wrong, this was their normality and there were no other choices. In this context, I began to see my own crime as somehow worse. I came from a loving and stable family with no history of crime or substance abuse. In two years, I would leave this place and never come back. I had the great and fortunate advantage of knowing that I had the option to live differently. When I came out, I would have a husband, a house and children waiting for me. Mentally, I'd decided that my time in prison would be productive. I would work to earn money, relish the forced sobriety, complete the twelve-step program, and allow myself to miss my girls so intensely that when I went back to them I would never make the same mistake. Prison was my opportunity for a fresh start. I did not realise that incarceration would be the easy part.

Up on the altar the kids have stopped singing and the priest steps up to the lectern. 'Thank you, children, for that wonderful retelling of the nativity. That was quite the choir of angels.' He gives them an appreciative nod and my heart swells with pride. 'Now, children, it's six sleeps until Christmas and

there's one very important thing you must do before Santa can deliver his presents.'

The kids raise their hands to yell out suggestions. 'Put out carrots.'

'Write a letter.'

'Sweep out the chimney.'

The priest smiles. 'All excellent ideas. But I have another one.' He pauses. 'If you're old enough to have received the sacrament of reconciliation, please use it and go to confession.' His smile widens at the low groan that ripples through the children. 'Parents, think of it as clearing the mental decks. Something we can all use at this time of the year. I'll be in the sacristy after the nativity for anyone who would like to unburden their soul. Soft penance guaranteed.' He ends with a wink and a titter runs through the crowd as we stand for a final, rousing rendition of 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas'.

From down the pew, Jamila grabs my arm, as two little angels materialise by my side—Paige and Luna. 'So, I'll be in touch about that catch-up?'

'Are we having a play date?' Paige jumps up and down on the spot. 'Yay,' she and Luna scream together.

'Looks like it's settled,' says Jamila as she's dragged in the other direction by a little boy dressed as a shepherd.

'I'll be in touch.' I wave and force my mouth into a smile.

Paige tugs my arm. 'Mummy, can we go and play outside now? I want to see my friends.'

The school has organised for a post-nativity barbecue that I was hoping to avoid by making a quick exit from the church. But Paige has run off without waiting for an answer and Harper is nowhere to be seen. Andrew touches my arm. 'Let them go. Just for a few minutes. They deserve some time with their friends.' He leans in to speak quietly. 'I'll keep watch and you can wait in the car if you'd prefer.'

'That'd be great,' I say with relief and gratitude at my husband's thoughtfulness.

I wait for the throng to disperse, then sneak towards the side exit but as I'm about to reach it the priest materialises from the vestry wearing long brown robes and an expression of surprise.

'Ah. A taker for confession.' He brings his hands together, eyebrows heightened in delight. 'Have to admit I did think the sausages were a compelling offer but good to see someone who's ruled by the heart and not the stomach.'

I raise my hands defensively. 'Oh, no, I'm sorry, I—'

He stops, face falling into disappointment as realisation dawns. 'You were heading for the car park,' he says simply. 'Don't mind me.' He stands aside to let me past but I find myself rooted to the spot. It's hard not to feel sympathy. The man is like a salesman with no customers and I hate being a party to failure, especially when I know that what he's offering could be something I genuinely need.

'If you're free, maybe I would like a chat. But I'm sorry I'm a very lapsed

Catholic. I don't even remember the proper words.'

The priest produces a laminated piece of paper. 'I have the cheat sheet. Let's go.' He beckons me to where two chairs have been set up in a side alcove, hidden from view from the main part of the church but still open to all comers. I follow the priest's swishing brown robes, desperately hoping that no one is watching.

When we sit and face each other, the priest gives me a friendly smile. Just as the silence is getting awkward and I'm wondering if I should start reciting the words off the card, he extends his hand for me to shake. 'I'm Father Ramesh, pleased to meet you.'

It's not what I'm expecting. I've never shaken hands with a priest. But when I take his palm in mine, it's warm and dry and strangely comforting.

'Uh, thank you, Father. I'm Marianne.'

'Now, Marianne, what's on your mind today?'

I hold up the laminated card. 'You want me to start with this?'

'You know what—' He gently takes the plastic out of my hands. 'Let's forget that and just talk. Tell me what's bothering you.'

'Um, well. Nothing in particular.'

'Nothing?' The priest smiles. 'When I saw you rushing across my altar, I thought to myself, *There goes a woman with the weight of the world on her shoulders.*' He does an impression of me, shoulders hunched and scurrying.

I can't help but let out a laugh. The impression is spot on. 'Let's blame it on Christmas.'

'I hear that a lot.' He sighs. 'I'm sure it's not what God intended when he sent us his only son.' He cocks his head. 'But with you, I sense it's more than that. You don't have to tell me everything, in fact you don't have to tell me anything, but I have a theory that Catholics invented confession not to make people feel bad about their sins but to make them feel better. God always forgives, assuming there is genuine remorse. Some may argue that's not always a good thing and that God and priests can't be judge and jury. But—' He holds up his hand then places it to his chest. 'Confession is also about self-forgiveness and freeing ourselves of guilt which can be so damaging to the soul when it is allowed to fester.'

I absorb Father Ramesh's words and focus on the cross around his neck. Honestly, I'm starting to feel a little annoyed that this man—a celibate priest whose life could not be more different from my own—is giving me a lecture on how to live. And yet, what's truly annoying is that he does seem to understand, innately, what I need right now. What he's offering is so tempting.

'Father, I'm sorry, but I'm telling you there are sins that cannot be forgiven.'

'The only sin that cannot be forgiven is the one for which you are not truly sorry. The sin we hide. God cannot forgive that to which we do not confess. Without honesty and truth-telling you will never be free.'

The words twang in my chest and for a moment I wonder how it might

feel to be truly honest with this man and say the words aloud. To tell someone in this school community the truth. ‘Whatever I tell you here can’t be repeated to anyone. Is that right?’

‘The confessional seal is absolute.’ Noting my confused expression, Father Ramesh goes on. ‘In layman’s terms, if I tell anyone what is said in confession, the Pope will kick me out of the priesthood.’ He leans in. ‘But I get invited to dinner nearly every night of the week and I’m not willing to give that up in a hurry.’ He leans out again. ‘So how about you tell me what’s really on your mind, Marianne?’

I give Father Ramesh a potted version of my life—Dad’s death, my love of piano, my deep insecurities, my struggles with motherhood and the sense of failure that made me turn to alcohol. His face remains unchanged throughout. There’s a kindness and absence of judgement in his eyes that makes me comfortable in sharing. But it’s strange, hearing myself speak the words and describe an experience that has only ever existed in my mind. I’ve never really told anyone about the years leading up to the accident. Who could I tell? The people closest to me—Andrew, Mum, Elli—*lived* through it all. But in speaking the words, I hear myself making sense of it all and how far into a black hole I had fallen when the accident happened.

I get to the day of the crash. ‘There’s so much that’s missing but what matters is this: I’d been drinking. I also took a sedative. I don’t actually remember that, I don’t remember anything of that day, not even waking up or dropping the girls at school. But the blood test proved it and there’s no doubt. I drank, not a huge amount, but enough to go over the limit; I took a sedative, got into a car and caused an accident that killed two people, an elderly woman and her grandchild—and I can never, ever forgive myself for that. You can give me all the penance in the world but the guilt will always remain in here.’ I tap my chest. ‘You say that forgiveness is contingent on being truly sorry and I am truly, deeply sorry. But it’s not real to me. It’s abstract, being sorry for something you can’t remember.’ I close my eyes, hoping the extra focus will prompt another memory. Again, I see Andrew following me and trying to take the keys off me. I see a man’s hands—they have to be Andrew’s—on the steering wheel. It’s his wedding ring—black titanium with a flower vine engraved to symbolise the two of us and our entwining love. I squeeze my eyes even harder, scouring the image with forensic intensity. Then, it comes. A fresh vision. One from earlier that day. This time Andrew and I are in the kitchen along with a third person, a woman. There’s an open wine bottle on the bench but some of it has spilt on my pink blouse and I’m at the sink, trying to sponge it out. The woman is at my side trying to help but I turn to her and scream, ‘Don’t you think you’ve done enough?’ and I keep on scrubbing.

My eyes flick open. Father Ramesh watches me intently, eyebrows slightly furrowed.

‘What is it, Marianne? What did you remember?’

‘My sister,’ I whisper. ‘We had a fight.’

25

Christmas Day

Someone is knocking on George's door, right when he's just at the good part.

'Fuck off,' he yells as his two dachshunds, Bach and Wagner, scratch at the wood like mini bulldozers trying to burrow their way to gold. Who on earth is knocking on his fucking door on fucking Christmas Day? Can't they hear the music? Can't they hear that he's busy?

He roots around for the remote control to turn down the Houston Symphony and its booming choir, blowing like steam trains as they belt out their hallelujahs. The ensuing silence falls like death. What sacrilege, to mute the 'Hallelujah Chorus' of Handel's *Messiah*—the same piece of music he's played every Christmas for decades.

He shuffles down the hallway on his walker. 'I'm coming, I'm coming. Keep your shirt on.'

Either the person doesn't hear him or decides he's being too slow because the next knock is louder, more insistent. The dogs yap back in glee. George feels his blood pressure rising. The hide of some people. The last gift an eighty-one-year-old wants for Christmas is a bloody pressure spike.

Fuck you, Richard. Fuck. You.

It's not the first time today that he's taken his partner's name in vain and it won't be the last. Richard should be the one answering the door. Listening to Handel. Cracking the bubbly. Entertaining visitors with his wit. This is how it was during their thirty-two-year relationship. Oh, the fuckery of loved ones dying right when you need them most, when you're old and feeble and it takes two minutes just to get to the door and even longer to get to the toilet. It wasn't in their plan. It certainly wasn't in George's plan. It had always been their joke, how George took up with a younger man so he would be sure to be outlived. But cancer didn't discriminate according to age. It took his darling Richard like a gust of wind. One minute he was a healthy and happy sixty-three-year-old with a full head of hair and a regular diet of golf and massages. The next, he was as yellow as urine and complaining of feeling buggered all the time. And not in the sexual way. Six months it took.

Six short, agonising months that consisted of George swearing and raging as the love of his life wasted away in the bedroom. Five Christmases he's endured without Richard. Never gets easier. Over the decades together, they'd made their own traditions—mimosas and panettone for breakfast, a full three-course gourmet feast for the misfits and queers they'd collected as friends and any other lost souls looking for a gay old time, and a rousing finale of Handel's *Messiah* with whiskey-laced eggnog before they all collapsed in a heap on the couch. Bloody brilliant.

With Richard gone, all that remains of that fabulous day is the Handel. George can't be bothered with the rest. It hurts too much. Richard was the foodie. The extrovert. The cook. None of it's possible without him. Christmas today, and for the past few years, is a day of microwaved turkey dinner from the supermarket, a few large whiskeys and a shouting-type rendition of the 'Hallelujah Chorus' where George rages against whatever dickhead deity decided to claim his beautiful Richard for the heavens. Fuck the heavens. George needed him here. Needs him still.

What can the people bashing his door want? If it's a prank by neighbourhood kids he'll give them what for. Then again, it might be his neighbour Marianne. She did say she'd drop by with some pudding after lunch. Good woman that one. Hopefully she heard his playing of the Rach 2 this morning, just for her.

'Uh, hello. I'm Constable Lui and this is Constable Sharma.'

The two police officers—one female, one male—at his front door are young. Such clear eyes and smooth skin. Enough to make you weep. But cops are cops and George has too many memories of poofter bashings of the eighties to feel any affection.

'What do you want?'

'Well, uh, you might have seen a bit of the activity happening at your neighbour's?' The lady cop's eyebrows are hidden by a heavy dark fringe. Hair like black silk, cut in a short, blunt bob.

'What do you mean, activity?'

'At the Antonio house.' She points to the right. George likes the wife but hasn't got much time for that husband of hers. Good-looking guy. Tall brunette. Richard would have been all over him like a rash, despite the fact of him being clearly very straight. Almost the minute they moved in, he came and knocked on George's door to introduce himself. Talked about his kids and wife. How excited they were about the move and how it would be a fresh start for all of them. His wife had been unwell, he said. But she was better now and they just wanted to get on with their lives. Could he come in for a quick chat about something?

For a reason he still couldn't quite fathom, George had stood aside and then offered him a drink. A weak moment. He'd been listening to one of Richard's favourite symphonies and feeling particularly maudlin. This new neighbour waltzed in like he was André bloody Rieu—handsome and sure of himself.

‘So you’re a Chausson fan?’ asked the handsome neighbour—Andrew. ‘Don’t turn it down on my account. My wife’s a classical pianist, the Rach 2 is her party trick.’

George had stopped with his fingers on the volume control. ‘Have to say I prefer the Frogs over the Russkis. Chausson was my partner’s favourite.’

‘Your partner had good taste.’ Andrew followed him into the kitchen. ‘I read up on him once. You know he died after he rode his bike into a brick wall?’ He shook his head. ‘Forty-four years old. Some say it was suicide but who knows? Claude Debussy came to his funeral. As did the artists Degas and Rodin. Quite the roll call.’

‘Have you heard of Aubrey O’Neill?’

‘The Australian composer? Of course.’

‘He came to my partner’s funeral. Richard was a huge fan. A benefactor when we could afford it.’

‘So you and Richard can take some credit for those concertos he’s produced? That’s some claim to fame.’

George didn’t like big-noting himself, especially not with strangers, but this man made him feel at ease. The way *Richard* had rolled off his tongue so easily. No flinching, no half-smile, no eyelid batted.

They’d sat on George’s back deck and talked for an hour about their favourite composers, alive and dead. When the conversation went silent, Andrew had risen to his feet and gone to the railing overlooking the bush.

‘How about we cut some of those trees back? I can organise it for you.’

Amid the rising moon that had dipped the eucalypts in silver and the genial, almost beguiling nature of the conversation, it would have been so easy to say yes, and maybe that’s what this fella had been counting on. The conversation was a kind of lullaby, hushing and soothing. But as George found his mouth forming on the words ‘Yeah, sure. Go for it’ he caught himself. What? Cut the trees? The idea pulled him out of the reverie like a needle scratching across vinyl. No bloody way. He loved the wild and untamed nature of his backyard. That’s why he and Richard had bought the place. Theirs was an end block which meant only one set of neighbours. Over the years, various families had come and gone from the joint next door and they’d always been at George and Richard to cut back more and more of the bush. Fire safety, they claimed. Council regulations. Dangerous branches. Better for the other trees.

All bullshit.

The old-growth eucalypts were magnificent, at least one hundred years old according to one council arborist and likely to live another hundred, if left alone. The branches were leafy and lush, so thick with foliage that they kept the neighbour’s block in shade for most of the year. And that was the issue. The bastards didn’t give a shit about George or Richard or the trees, they just wanted the bloody sun. But at least they weren’t sneaky about it. Not like this arsehole who’d waltzed into his home, buttered him up with music talk, drunk his wine and taken Richard’s name in vain. He was just as

bad as the rest of them, maybe worse. It was damn sneaky and he'd nearly got under George's defence. Nearly.

'I don't think so, mate.'

'No?' Andrew had whipped round so quick that George was sorely tempted to warn him that his knickers would be in a twist if he wasn't careful. But the sunniness had gone from the man's face so George kept quiet.

'What do you mean?' asked Andrew, genuinely confused.

'I mean no. N-bloody-o. I like the trees and no one's gonna cut anything off any of them.'

'George, come on, be reasonable. They shade our whole backyard. And what if one of them fell? They could crush our kids.'

'Mate, those trees are gonna be standing well beyond my death, yours and your kids.'

Andrew took a beat. 'I'm trying to be a good neighbour here. It doesn't have to be much, just a small prune. More a tidy-up. I'll pay, of course.' He gave a smile so tight he looked like the fucken Luna Park clown.

'Nope.'

The smile evaporated quick fast. Andrew dropped his head, a vein throbbing at his neck. The bloke was trying so bloody hard not to lose his shit it was almost funny.

'George, I don't want to get council involved here but I can if I have to. My firm is very experienced in these types of matters.'

'Go your hardest, mate. The council won't do shit. Those trees are one hundred per cent legal and one hundred per cent healthy and there's nothing you or your lawyer mates can do to change those facts. You say you're being a good neighbour but you're not. You're just bullying me. An eighty-one-year-old invalid with barely two pennies to rub together. How bloody dare you.'

At that point, Andrew had leant off the railing and took two solid strides like a fighter gearing up for the bout. There he stood over George, menacing and threatening.

But George had stared down far worse in his life. Being gay in the eighties was not for the faint-hearted. 'What are you gonna do, mate? Bash a queer old pensioner? Not a great look for a lawyer, I'd imagine.'

George braced but he didn't need to. His words had done the trick. The lovely new neighbour stepped back, fingers still curled to a fist but the fight gone out of him 'cause he knew he was outplayed. George had seen the type before, all nice as pie until they can't get their way.

His poor missus.

She's a good egg, for someone who's married to a dickhead. Nice of her to ask him for Christmas even though there wasn't a snowflake's chance in hell of that happening. She loves the old gums. Thought George was having a lend when he mentioned how her husband wants to chop them down. Sometimes, he sees her on the back deck, just standing there and gazing out at them. A few weeks ago, she'd brought out a bottle of wine and put it on

the table, looking like she wasn't sure what to do with it. She nearly shat herself when he spoke up and offered to help her drink the thing. Then, when she thought he'd gone, she threw the whole lot into the bushes. *Ah, George had thought. It's the booze that's the issue.* From that point he'd looked at her differently. The grog had never been his problem but he sure as shit knew a lot about shame. What poisonous muck it was, too. All those years he spent nearly killing himself with the effort of bottling up his feelings for men. It was Richard who'd freed him from all that shit. Showed him that loving another man didn't make him a paedo, it made him human. And that he was worthy of being loved unconditionally, even if he was a cranky old bastard. Who's the Richard for this Marianne? That's a woman on the brink if ever he saw one and he doubts that husband of hers is the type to put up with the messy shitshow of addiction. He doesn't even like overgrown trees for fuck's sake.

'Can we come in for a moment?' The male police officer steps forward in confirmation that 'no' is not a possible answer. George notes his pulse tick up a notch.

'We noticed your back deck from next door. Just wondering if you'd been out there at all today?'

'Nah. Keep myself to myself on Christmas.'

'Do you mind if we take a look?'

'Knock yourselves out.'

He lets them lead the way, down the hallway, through the kitchen and towards the back deck that he and Richard added to the house in the early two-thousands.

'Had these closed all day?' The lady cop points at the French doors that open onto the deck.

'On and off.'

Outside, the sun is setting, fireball orange, the dying embers of another Christmas, and thank fuck for that. Across the fence is a hive of activity. There are more police. One of them is stringing blue and white tape about the deck, like a kind of fucked-up tinsel. Two more figures move about and they could be mistaken for snowmen because they're encased in bulky white plastic. One of them is photographing the stairs and now that George has a proper gander, it looks as if someone threw a bottle of wine down them, staining the treads blood-red. George experiences an osteoarthritic softening in his bones, the same weakening he experienced in the hours where Richard wavered between life and death in their bed, letting out the occasional gasp then going seconds without breathing until there were no more breaths. Fuck it was awful. Death, stealing up on them like a grim reaper come to collect its prey.

George clears the knot in his throat. 'What happened?'

The male cop speaks. 'That's what we're looking into. Did you happen to hear or see anything out of the ordinary? Anything you think we should know about your neighbours?'

He's not telling them jack shit. You cannot trust a copper. He'll speak with Marianne first before he says a single word to these wet-behind-the-ears dopes.

‘How about you tell me what happened?’ George repeats.

‘It was some kind of fall down the stairs. We’re looking into the circumstances.’

‘Someone died?’

The cops exchange glances. The lady cop speaks. ‘Yes, someone died.’

26

22 December

Ellinor

In her career as a solicitor Elli has stared down corporate bullies and snooty top silks more than once or twice, but standing in front of a wall of toys at Kmart must rank as one of the more discombobulating experiences of her life. The plastic. The pink. The teetering piles of boxes. The harsh fluorescent lights. The screaming toddlers. The reflective surfaces. Elli rubs her temples, tries to ignore the throbbing behind her right eye.

Margaret flexes her hands with irritation. 'It's not here. Marianne must have got it wrong.'

Elli moves further along the aisle, eyes still scanning. 'She rang the store to check and they said they had it in stock.'

'What sort of name is Mariah, anyway?'

'Pretty common one, I'd say, especially at this time of year.' If Elli hears Mariah Carey's 'All I Want For Christmas Is You' one more time during this shopping trip, she may well scream. What an insidious earworm.

'I think we'll have to tell Marianne it's not here. There's a million other dolls and they all look the same. Surely Paige wouldn't mind any one of them? Look, here's one. Twenty-nine-ninety-nine. Perfect.'

'She wants an Our Generation doll. And it has to be Mariah.' Elli speaks through a clenched jaw. 'Those things matter to a child. Remember when I was fourteen? The Walkman?'

'I have no idea what you're talking about.'

'I asked for a portable CD player, a Discman, and you got me a cassette player?'

'Darling, that was thirty years ago. You cannot expect me to remember every Christmas gift I ever gave you.'

'A child never forgets the bad ones. It's actually traumatising.'

Margaret sniffs. 'I think you're being a little over-melodramatic. I was doing it all on my own. Back in my day, it was considered a treat to—'

‘To get an orange in your sack, I know. But, Mum, the Depression ended before you were even born.’

Her mother gives her a sideways look. ‘Seems like someone needs a bit more sleep. Did you take that melatonin?’

Ellinor counts to three. Closes her eyes, then reopens them. ‘Mum, I’m not tired.’ She most definitely is tired. Exhausted, actually. Even the temazepam hasn’t solved her night wakings with too many anxious thoughts. But her mother’s suggestion that her irritation is caused solely by fatigue makes her feel like a three-year-old. Something about being back in Newcastle has made her feel strange. Is it her mother’s soulless new flat? A home that completely lacks the charm and memories of their old house. Or is it the frustration that nothing much in this town has changed and returning is like a time warp that zaps her straight back into being a moody teen? It might have been a mistake to come but Maz is so on edge about Christmas that Elli feels she needed her space. Then there was Andrew. She’d thought maybe the time apart might have erased all that had passed between them but it is still there—awkward and large. How they ever managed to work together on Maz’s court case is almost beyond her. It’s like they all erased the day of the accident from their brains and became laser-focused on keeping Maz out of jail or at least keeping the sentence down. What they need is a good conversation to clear the air and work out a way forward. They’ve never dealt, properly, with what happened and now Maz is starting to remember too much. Her mother is another problem. Several times, Elli has caught her staring and then opening her mouth as if she’s about to say something significant, only to close it again. The verbal constipation is so unlike her mum and it’s giving Elli the shits, pardon the pun.

‘Mum, we have to get the gift that Paige wants. Don’t you think she deserves that? Maz wants to make it special for them and I don’t think it’s too much to ask.’ She clenches her fingers to a fist, then releases. Clenches and releases while her mother huffs up and down the aisle. Elli has always hated shopping, so what on earth possessed her to agree to this outing?

Because it has to be done. Because you abandoned these girls when they needed you. Because you’re never going to have children of your own.

Standing in front of the great wall of toys, Elli experiences a prick of heat in her eyes as the doctor’s words flit through her brain.

I have to be honest with you ... Biology doesn’t wait ... If only you’d come to see us when you were in your thirties ... I’m sorry it’s not better news but we can still try if you really want to.

That’s the thing. It isn’t actually news at all, not in the sense of it being surprising or shocking. Before the appointment, Elli had done her Dr Googling. She knows the chances of conceiving a baby through IVF drop off a cliff after the age of forty, let alone forty-four. But there’s a world of difference between reading an article on the internet and being given the facts by a kind, but quite young, female doctor whose eggs were no doubt still viable, or possibly chilling in the deep freeze as they spoke. No wedding

ring, Elli had noted, before tears started leaking from her eyes. Dr Johann reached for the tissues without even looking at the box, like her hand was so practised at finding them it didn't require the assistance of vision. Elli felt so stupid, so naïve, but perhaps even a tad relieved. She had tried. She had made the preliminary investigations. The doctor had recommended some testing to assess the viability of her geriatric eggs but it was best to have realistic expectations.

'I don't want to mislead you here. The chances of IVF conception at the age of forty-four ...' She paused and assumed an expression of apology. 'Look, they're not high. At all. But there may be other options. A donor egg, for instance.'

'How would that work? Can I ... is it possible to ...' Elli's voice had trailed off. She knew you couldn't pay for a surrogate in Australia but could you buy an egg? It sounded so crass, like it was something you picked up at the supermarket alongside your actual carton of eggs.

Dr Johann did not flinch but simply gave an understanding nod. 'In Australia, an egg donor must be someone who is known to you and you cannot pay for the donation but it would be expected that you cover their medical costs. We have a limited program where we occasionally get young women who come to us wanting to make an altruistic donation. But mostly we find it works best if our patients have a family member or friend.' Dr Johann finished with raised eyebrows, suggesting it was more of a question than a statement.

'I have a sister but ... she's been through a lot and I don't know if it would be the right thing ... I don't know.'

'How about you have a think about it and in the meantime let's get those tests done.'

Standing in front of the toys, Elli prays her mother cannot see the wedge of pamphlets and blood test referrals chocking up her bag. She can't handle an inquisition right now. She blinks and blinks again to get rid of the moisture and focus on the multitude of dolls' names emblazoned on the boxes. April. Vienna. Holly. Leah.

'Hang on. I think this is it.' Elli reaches for a pink box, balanced precariously at an angle on the top shelf.

'Thank goodness for that. Careful there or you might bring down the whole lot.'

'It's ... fine,' Elli huffs at full stretch, fingertips grazing but not quite catching hold of the doll.

'Maybe we should find an assistant?'

'I. Can. Do. It.' With a final leap, Elli's right hand grasps the toy but her aim is not quite accurate and the resulting tumble of boxes is like watching bricks of the Great Wall come tumbling down, one by one. Another of the casualties is Elli's handbag, and its contents join the dolls in being strewn about the floor. So many pictures of perfect mothers and babies staring back up at her. *When it's a family you want ...*

‘Oh.’ Margaret stares at the mess of papers and boxes. Realisation rolls over her face like a breaking wave. ‘Oh, Ellinor.’ Her voice is sympathetic, all irritation erased. ‘You had your appointment. Why didn’t you tell me?’ She bends down and starts picking up the mess.

This is what a mother does, thinks Ellinor. Tidies up the messes. She joins her on the floor.

*

After the tumbling great wall of dolls fiasco, mother and daughter had agreed that what was required was a double-shot espresso and a large piece of carrot cake to share. Were it later in the afternoon and were her mother not allergic to alcohol, Elli would have suggested a gin and tonic. But caffeine and sugar would have to do.

‘What about Marianne? Would you ask her to be a donor?’ says Margie.

Elli pauses with the coffee cup to her lips. ‘Now? Really? Just after she’s starting to settle back into normal life? I don’t think so.’

‘But she would do it in a heartbeat. She adores you and you did so much for her—you and Andrew—during the legal proceedings.’

‘She’d do it because she feels she owes me?’ Elli shakes her head. ‘That’s a bad idea.’

‘Because she loves you and she’s your sister. And the baby would then be genetically related to you.’ Margaret gives a satisfied ‘problem-solved’ kind of smile.

‘It’s not that easy. She’d have to pump herself full of hormones to stimulate the egg production. Not the best thing for a recovering alcoholic.’

Margaret stiffens at the mention of the word *alcoholic*, which only serves to annoy Elli. Why can’t her mother face facts, even now? How can she think that denying the truth is helpful? Elli understands that it’s driven by shame but why should her mother be ashamed of her daughter’s illness? It’s not Margie’s fault. Would she act that way if Marianne had MS or osteoarthritis or any other chronic illness? The problem with shame is that it squashes truths and allows secrets to fester. Elli isn’t a fan.

‘I think a baby is just what this family needs,’ says Margie.

‘You seemed to think at lunch that it was a bad idea.’

‘I was just a bit surprised. That’s all. How can I possibly be against solo parenting when I’ve been a single mother for so much of my life?’

‘I think that’s exactly why you’re against it. You know how hard it is. You think I’m not up to it.’

‘Again, not true. But there are things to consider.’ Her mother takes another sip of coffee and eyes Ellinor over the rim. ‘How would you ... procure a father for this child?’

Elli sighs. ‘I haven’t even got that far.’

Margaret places her coffee cup back on the saucer. ‘You know, I met a nice man recently at the warehouse. He’s a volunteer. He’s the one who’s

coming to Christmas.'

Elli groans. 'No, Mum. You cannot use Christmas as a blind date.'

'I'm not. But just as your baby might help us find joy again, I think this man could really help Marianne. What happened to her was a terrible, terrible accident that could have happened to anyone.'

Elli is tempted to point out that it might not have happened to a sober person but thinks better of it.

Margie continues. 'What Marianne needs to do is forgive herself. It's the only way she can really move on.'

'And how can this guy help?'

'He can forgive her.'

'You're making it sound like he's Jesus or something.'

'No.' Her mum does that staring, open-mouthed thing and Elli's about to shout at her to spit it out when Margie leans in.

'He's the son. The uncle.'

What is her mother talking about? Is this early onset dementia? Her eyes are a bit wild and glazed like the carrot cake has given her a massive sugar rush.

'I'm getting strong Holy Trinity vibes.'

'Ellinor, be serious. Listen to me. He's Dianne's son. Rose's uncle.'

Those names prick her brain like bindi-eyes. Spontaneous, disproportionate pain.

'What? From the—'

Her mother nods.

Oh, fuck.

27

22 December

Margaret

She has played out this moment in her mind for so many years but now that it's here she's unsure where to begin. Only one thing is clear: the time is right to tell her daughter the truth. She must make her understand why Dominic is crucial to her plan.

Admittedly a shopping centre food court wasn't perhaps the best place but she hadn't been planning to say anything at all until it came out. As soon as she'd floated the concept Elli had rushed Margie out of the centre and kept up a barrage about what a terrifically bad idea it would be to have Dominic meet with Marianne.

'On Christmas of all the days,' she kept repeating. Margaret simply let her go, steering the car through lefts and rights until they found themselves on Wharf Road, with Newcastle's busy harbour on the left.

She tunes out her daughter's ongoing tirade and allows her gaze to be drawn to a massive tanker being shepherded silently out of the port by tugboats either side, no doubt loaded with coal for the overseas market.

'What are we doing here?' Elli demands as Margaret brings the car to a stop in a parking spot that looks onto Nobbys Beach, a usually popular swimming spot for families that's quiet for this mid-week December day. The sight of the red and yellow flags causes her hands to pause on the steering wheel. She feels the weight of her daughter's gaze. Is she doing the right thing here?

'You hate this beach,' says Elli.

'We're going for a walk to the lighthouse.' Margaret wrenches up the handbrake. 'I have something to tell you.'

*

Sixty-one years ago, on this beach, Margaret (known as Peggy) Arnold rode

her first surfboard—a 6-foot piece of styrofoam covered in blue synthetic material that towered over the nine-year-old but gave her the most extraordinary sense of freedom and power. Sliding down that first glorious wave she gave thanks to the ocean and to Santa, but mostly to her parents, Irene and Bill, for whom the surfboard represented a solid portion of Bill's weekly wage from the BHP steelworks. Christmas in the Arnold household represented two things—gifts, and a lot more alcohol than usual, which was saying something. Little Peggy loved the gifts but didn't like the way the Christmas spirits made her father and her grandfather into raging, saliva-riddled, mouthy drunks. They were like inflatable punching-bag toys that swayed with the touch of a finger and reeled back and forth from a shove. When everyone had gone home from the riotous turkey and ham lunch, Peggy would hear her father weeping quietly in his room and moaning the names of his deceased mother and his little sister who had died in childbirth. These wild seesawing swings of emotion from reeling jolliness to utter despair made no sense to a young Peggy, so she focused on her two loves: surfing and going to the movies. She had dreams of one day becoming an actress like Audrey Hepburn or Grace Kelly, swanning about in New York and Monaco with dashing Gregory Peck-types at her beck and call. At the age of fourteen, she enrolled in a deportment and modelling course. While she attempted to walk with a book balanced on her head, a stern teacher informed her she had neither the looks nor the talent for a career in show business and she ought to focus on her studies instead. Peggy came home crushed but, in the chaos of the Arnold household, kept the disappointment to herself until her father had passed out in front of the television and the rest of the family was in bed. On the coffee table was an open bottle of port that was an almost permanent fixture in the spot, along with the well-thumbed form guide from the newspaper.

Peggy picked up the bottle and the cork made an *oink* sound as she took it out. The smell was terrible. Sweet and musty. But it must taste good—why else would her father guzzle so much? She put the brown bottle to her lips and drank, and drank, ignoring her temptation to spit out the sweet, vinegary liquid which, on top of her crushing disappointment, made her want to be sick. Gosh, it was awful. She felt worse than ever. Why did her father love it so? She looked at him, snoring away, fingers still stained with the grease of his day's labour despite the vigorous scrubbing before dinner. She sat back in the couch, waiting. Then, it started. A warm, tingling sensation that levitated from her toes and rose magically up her legs, making them feel pleasantly dead, and then through her stomach and chest, quieting the pulsing sadness and disappointment she'd felt when the deportment teacher had taken her by the shoulders and told her to take a good look in the mirror. 'Plain girls from Newcastle do not become movie stars. Ever.' God, what a soul-destroying thing to say to a starry-eyed fourteen-year-old. But, thanks to the port, those words were dissolving now into the fug of soft warmth and numbness overtaking Peggy's body. She took another sip and closed her eyes. This was

bliss.

*

It's fair to say that some alcoholics are a bit like goldfish who are asked to describe the concept of water. How do you explain the thing that's enveloped you for your whole life? This is how it was for Peggy. Yes, she was known by her speech pathology peers at university as a good-time girl but that wasn't a problem until her new boyfriend—the British-born Jeffrey on a university exchange to study commerce in Australia—raised it as being one. They were at a college party, dancing to the Rolling Stones' 'Brown Sugar' when the host pressed a glass of wine into her hand, and Jeffrey promptly took it out.

'Hey, that's my drink.' She twirled, grasping for the glass.

'How about one night without it?' he asked with his gentle brown eyes and cultured accent. 'You don't always need to drink.'

'Don't be such a stuck-up Pom. It's fun and I like it.'

'What if I don't like it?' In the mass of whirling bodies, Margie's (Peggy was too juvenile) sober boyfriend stood with hands on hips, still as a headstone, watching as she gulped. 'You're not you when you drink.'

'I'm better. That's the point.'

He shook his head. 'If only you could see what I see.'

What Margie couldn't see was any problem at all. Neither her mother nor grandmother had ever challenged the excesses of their husbands. Drinking was not only tolerated, it was excused. Nearing payday, Margie and her three siblings subsisted on eggs and toast because Bill had drunk the money away. Certainly his evening rants were annoying in the extreme but she assumed many families lived this way. It wasn't terrible. They had a roof over their heads. Bill wasn't violent and there were worse things to eat than eggs on toast.

The problem was, at twenty-one years old, Margie was deeply in love with Jeffrey. He was smart and kind—and when she squinted, he could pass for Gregory Peck's son. Marriage seemed both likely and desirable. But the drinking was clearly a deal-breaker. Jeffrey did not like it so she learnt to hide the booze in the cracks of her life. Working helped. She could not drink when she was teaching children how to form an S with their tongue behind their front teeth and Jeffrey considered a bottle of wine with dinner to be acceptable. Fortunately, she was able to abstain during both of her pregnancies—the morning sickness killed her desire for alcohol. But once the babies came and she was alone at home with them all day the desire returned, powerful as a jilted lover. The days were so long and lonely and the transition from career woman to full-time stay-at-home parent was a shock. She adored the girls but babies cried so much and there was no intellectual stimulation. Alcohol was the best and only coping mechanism she knew. She got the system down to a fine art: five vodka-sodas in the middle of the day while her husband was at work as an accountant, making sure to consume

her final one by 3 pm which gave her enough time to sober up slightly before he got home. There'd be two wines over dinner, which Jeffrey considered acceptable. Mostly. At times, he looked at her as if he knew there was more to it but he did not challenge her. He loved her and Margie loved him equally—he was intelligent and kind and an excellent father to Ellinor and Marianne. Their lives in Newcastle were full of school, sport and surfing. She gave up work for the girls and chose not to return, even after they started school. Jeffrey didn't object—it made his life easier for her to be present and in charge of the home front. So often he commented on how the UK could never have given them such a great lifestyle. He certainly missed his family but the girls, Margie and the brilliant Australian sun made it all worthwhile. Things were good, until suddenly they weren't.

A couple of days after Margie's thirty-eighth birthday, her father died. Cirrhosis of the liver.

'It's a miracle he made it this far,' mused Jeffrey on their way to the funeral. 'You can't abuse your body like that and expect to live a long life.' Bill was sixty-one, barely out of his fifties. If Margie kept going the way she was, would she too be dead in a little over two decades? As the priest eulogised 'life-of-the-party' Billy Arnold, she resolved to give it all away, starting next week. She needed a few days to get her head around the idea, maybe find some support services to help. But it had to be done. With the decision made, she proceeded to indulge at the wake in several glasses of wine with her sister Del, knowing it would be one of the last times. In the car on the way home, she was enjoyably tipsy and in an expansive mood so that when Jeffrey suggested a late afternoon swim at Nobbys Beach and the girls shouted their enthusiastic agreement, Margie was in no mood to disagree. Her daughters found the funeral long and boring. Perhaps their Grandpa Billy was loved by many but Margie understood that he scared them with his purple-red nose and oft-slurred speech. That would not be her. Margie would not frighten her grandchildren, if she was lucky enough to have them.

That January afternoon, with the sun shooting red-gold rays from the western horizon, Nobbys was wild and windy, the waves thrashing against the sand. The lifeguards had packed up for the day and posted a BEACH CLOSED sign in the sand. The girls moaned their disappointment and Margie's insides slumped.

Her father had died, she was giving up alcohol—the drug that had been such a friend to her. She desperately needed to feel the fizz and brine of the saltwater against her body, to wake her up from this depressive stupor. Jeffrey had noticed her eyes falling closed in the car and asked what was wrong.

'A bit tired, that's all. Nothing to worry about.'

But he'd given her one of those odd looks, like she was a complete stranger to him.

Standing on the beach, Margie threw down her towel and beach bag. 'I don't care what the sign says, I'm going in. You girls stay here.' And off she'd

stomped towards the hungry ocean. So what if the waves were a little more wild than usual? She'd been coming to this beach all her life and could manage any challenges it threw at her. She ducked under the first wave, surprised at its force as she stumbled to regain her footing. Never mind. It would be easier beyond the whitewater zone. She pulled herself in long strokes towards the deep where her toes could no longer touch the sand. The temperature was gorgeous—cool and life-giving, purifying her of the alcohol. At one point there was some shouting from the shore and she became aware that Jeffrey had followed her into the water. She turned to see his brown hair bobbing up and down in the waves. That was a bad idea. Jeffrey was a typical English swimmer. He knew the strokes but didn't understand how to navigate a beach, how to avoid the rips and currents. She yelled at him to go back. She was fine. The ocean was a beast she could tame—and if she could tame *this* wild thing, then she could surely quiet the wild thing inside of her.

When she got out, she found the girls building sandcastles at the water's edge. No Jeffrey.

'Where's Dad?' she asked casually, feeling a slight uptick in her pulse.

'He went for a swim with you,' said Ellinor, not looking up from the sand. 'He's out there, somewhere.' She waved her hand in an abstract manner.

Margie's gaze went to the washing machine of water. The sun had completed its quick dive into the horizon and the sky was bruising into soft lilacs and pale yellows.

There was no sign of her husband.

*

From the top of Nobby's Head, Margie and Elli look back down on the water where Jeffrey took his last breaths all those decades ago.

'I will always blame myself for your father's death,' whispers Margie. 'If I hadn't been drinking that day ...'

'What? Dad wouldn't have died? Mum, you can't know that for sure. Even if you'd been stone-cold sober you might still have walked into that water with Dad following you.' Elli takes her hand. A seagull swoops and caws overhead. 'But why didn't you tell us the truth?' Her tone is chastising, as if she is the parent and Margie the child. 'It would have helped enormously. You know how guilty Maz feels about her drinking. Completely blames herself. But if she understood there was a genetic component, who knows ...' Her daughter trails off.

Margie blinks back tears in the wind. The guilt is crushing. Could the truth have prevented Marianne from going down the drinking path? Maybe even prevented the accident. Oh god, the mistakes Margie has made; she has to make Ellinor understand. 'You don't know how much I wanted to tell you both, and Jeffrey's family as well. I so badly wanted their forgiveness but I was too ashamed of what I'd done and I was determined that the family curse would end with me. After that day, I never drank another drop of alcohol.'

‘So the allergy thing was just another lie.’

Elli releases Margie’s hand. The disgust in her voice is clear and Margie pauses, her heart somewhere up near her gullet, before speaking tentatively. ‘I’m so sorry, my darling. Truly sorry. Do you think you can ever forgive me?’

Her daughter sighs. ‘Mum, this is a lot to take in and I’m going to need more than thirty seconds.’ She is silent, her gaze to the horizon and Margie waits, her pulse so loud she can almost hear it. ‘Here’s how I see it. You had, you *have* an illness with a strong hereditary component. You thought you were doing what was best for us by hiding it. Clearly it wasn’t but I accept you did it out of love and you’ve worked hard to manage your condition ever since. I don’t blame you for Dad’s death. That was an accident. I can’t see it any other way, and you absolutely have my forgiveness on that front.’

Waves crash below against the rocks and Margaret feels her guilt easing and dispersing like the white water dissolving back into the ocean. She goes to take her daughter in a hug and Elli submits to it, her body softening against her mother’s. ‘You don’t know how much that means to me,’ Margie whispers.

And this is what I want for Marianne. The relief of being forgiven.

28

22 December

Marianne

It's one of those perfect December afternoons where the breeze is like bathwater and the sky is serving up an ice-cream symphony of vanilla and strawberry. In Jamila's pool, the girls splash and squeal with holiday-induced joy.

'Marco,' screams Paige.

'Polo,' Harper and Luna giggle.

'Fish out of water,' Paige shrieks.

'Noooo,' the girls reply and Luna, halfway up the pool steps, flops back into the water with a splash.

I stretch like a cat on Jamila's cushioned sun-lounger and stifle a yawn. I haven't had a decent night's sleep since the church—that sound of me shouting at Elli has been on near-constant replay but I'm still trying to make sense of it all. I've never shouted at my sister. She's never mentioned that we argued on the day of the accident. My brain is burning to ask her about it but she's still with Mum in Newcastle and I've decided to wait until after Christmas. It won't be an easy conversation and I don't want anything to cast a shadow over the day. I can't talk to Andrew about it either; he shuts down all conversation about Elli and I've noticed a change in the relationship between my husband and sister. They're polite to each other but there's none of the warmth or closeness that once existed, which has made me wonder if they'd had an argument or falling-out while I was in prison.

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' was Andrew's response when I raised it with him last night.

'You're ... you're awkward with each other. You circle each other like cats, like you're strangers. Did you argue over something while I was away? About the girls visiting?'

When I went into prison, Andrew and I had agreed that the girls would not visit. Too upsetting for them. Too confronting. Too confusing. Would it

really be beneficial to see their mother in jail? To go through the rigmarole of security searches and barbed wire and women, some quite imposing, all dressed in matching green tracksuits? Much as I detested the idea of not seeing them, I had to put my own needs aside and think, really think about what was best for the girls and that was for them to remain focused on their own lives and let their mum fade to the background for a couple of years. The one thing I did understand about children was how thoroughly they lived in the moment and how, in their limited perception, the entire world revolved around them. *Big main character energy*, was how Elli described it and she was absolutely right. I was a supporting actor who would simply drift offstage for a few scenes while my girls continued to be the stars of their own lives, ably supported by Andrew and Mum.

But after Elli's first visit to the centre—a visit in which I showed her the dairy and we wandered the paddocks before returning to the gathering area for a sugar-less cup of tea—she'd glanced about, then taken my hand in hers. 'I think you should let the girls come. They ask about you all the time and seeing you here might give them some comfort. It would be good for you, and good for them.'

But Andrew held firm. He said the girls were doing fine and did I really want them to have that concrete visual of me in a green tracksuit?

He had a point. If they did not visit, then in years to come my absence would merely be an odd blip in their lives—a gap in their memories where I simply wasn't present. Whereas if they did come, they'd have that image of me, behind a fence, for the rest of their lives. Still, I could not help thinking that children were prone to overactive imaginations. What if their imaginings of me were far worse than the reality? They knew I had gone to live in a place for 'people who made big mistakes'.

'You mean, like a jail?' Harper had asked the night we told her about the possibility of me going away, her eyes wide and panicked. 'They're locking you in a cell?'

'No, honey. This is more like a farm where you work very hard and you have your own room with a TV and a little sink. More like boarding school.'

'Like Hogwarts,' Paige had piped up.

'No, dummy. More like that school that Matilda goes to. Crunchem Hall.'

Now it was Paige's turn to look panicked. 'But, Mummy, you can't live with people like Miss Trunchbull. They'll kill you.'

I could see their little minds firing with all sorts of dastardly ideas and images. 'Darlings, it won't be anything like that.' I spoke with confidence but at that point I had no idea what to expect. I was terrified. My only knowledge of women's prisons came from what I'd seen on television shows that represented jails as places of violence and constant tension. *But that's TV*, I kept reminding myself. *Not reality*. I had to believe it would be different.

'It will be like a normal boarding school with nice teachers like you've got,' I said with confidence.

As it turned out, this wasn't quite accurate either. The wardens were firm,

down-to-earth and no-nonsense and lay somewhere in between the nurturing teachers my girls experienced and the fantastically horrid ones they read about in books. Some were friendly, happy to engage in conversation and comfortable exchanging some personal information about family and children; others kept a clear line of authority. All maintained a high level of professionalism. They were neither violent nor cruel. My fellow prisoners were well aware of their rights and the rules, as were the wardens. No one really wanted to be there, especially the prisoners, but there was also no great desire to escape. It was an atmosphere of resigned acceptance. After a week in the place, my terror had subsided and been replaced by mild, ongoing anxiety. I was still on alert—fights occasionally broke out—but I was not terrified. Violence occurred between women who had lost control or had little incentive to get out of prison. I had a huge motivation and I had promised myself I would not be a woman who lost control.

On visitation days, the prison took on a slightly different atmosphere. Everyone was on their best behaviour. Most were mums, and kids were a regular sight. Paige and Harper would be okay with this, I thought.

‘Elli thinks it would be good for them to come and visit,’ I told Andrew.

‘Your sister is not a parent.’

True, but she loved us all and only wanted the best for us. Surely, that was what mattered most? This is what I wanted to say but didn’t. I believed in the truth of my argument but my motivation to prosecute it was purely selfish. I wanted to see my kids but I had no right to demand it. After what I did, I had no right to demand anything for myself.

‘That’s bullshit,’ Elli exploded when I told her what Andrew had said. ‘Leave it with me. I’ll talk to him.’

But his stance did not change and Elli never went into detail about their conversations. Weeks passed and the girls did not visit, then Elli told me about the London job. She’d been offered the role of her dreams—senior associate for a big firm that specialised in capital markets.

‘But ...’ She’d paused. ‘I don’t know if this is the right time. I think I need to be here for you, for the girls.’

‘Elli, listen to me. You have done more for me and my family than anyone could possibly expect and I’m so grateful. But you have to go. You have to do this. We’ll be fine. I’ll be fine.’ It killed me to think she’d even consider knocking it back. Would I miss her? Absolutely. Did I want her to stay? Definitely. But did I want to carry the guilt of having held her back from pursuing the opportunity of a lifetime? Absolutely not.

Two weeks later, she flew out. The day of her flight was blue and clear and I spent most of it looking skyward with a bud of hope in my chest. I knew better than to think I might see her plane, but just knowing she was up there and winging her way to the other side of the world made me feel delighted.

When I got out of jail, Elli mentioned her plans to visit for Christmas and I insisted, immediately, that she come stay with us. I yearned for my sister

and her solid, grounding presence. I didn't even consult with Andrew; I didn't think I needed to. But now that I think back on it he was strange when I told him, suggesting that maybe she'd be better off staying in an Airbnb while she was here.

'Why would I send my sister to a stranger's flat when we have a perfectly good spare room?' I didn't mention that Elli also suggested staying elsewhere and that I'd had to persuade her into bunking in with us.

'It'll be more relaxing for her. The girls are pretty full-on, especially at Christmas time. Does she really want to be woken at the crack of dawn for presents?'

'She'll probably be the one to wake *them*.'

He'd shrugged. 'Suit yourself.'

*

A particularly ear-piercing shriek brings me back to Jamila's backyard. I leap up from the lounge. In the pool, there are only two heads bobbing in the water—Paige and Harper. Jamila's in the kitchen, preparing snacks for the girls. She asked me specifically to keep watch.

'Girls, where's Luna? Where is she?' My heart throbs *forte* in panic. 'Harps, where's Luna? Is she hiding? I can't see her.'

'Mum, she's there. Just chill.' With an exasperated look, Harper points to a gliding figure who surfaces near the edge.

'Luna, are you okay, honey?'

The little girl blinks water from her eyes. 'I'm fine. We're playing sharks. I'm a great white, and I'm going to eat you two.' She snaps her arms together like giant jaws and leaps towards Paige and Harper, causing them to screech like parrots.

'What's all the ruckus?' Jamila emerges from the French doors with a tray of food and an expression of mock-anger. 'Sounds like a herd of hungry hippos have taken over my pool.'

'We're playing sharks,' calls Luna.

'Right, well I suppose sharks wouldn't be interested in nachos, would they? Might have to throw this out.' She gives me a secret smile as she puts the tray on the outdoor coffee table.

'Noooooooo. We're coming.' In seconds, the trio is at the table and dripping chlorine as they dive on the food.

'Now, how about some Christmas cheer for the adults?' Jamila produces a bottle of pink wine from the esky. 'You'll join me, won't you, Marianne?' She holds up a glass.

'Mummy doesn't drink wine,' says Paige through a mouthful of chips. 'Not since the accident.'

Something glitches in the atmosphere. My muscles tense in reflex.

'Oh,' says Jamila, perplexed. 'I didn't know.' She lowers the bottle.

'No, it's fine. I will have a glass, thank you.' I'll fake it and pretend to sip.

No problem.

The smile returns to Jamila's generous mouth. 'Wonderful.' She unscrews the cap and there's something in that glugging sound of the wine being poured that prompts a tidal wave of saliva on my tongue.

Harper stops chomping and shoots me a look. 'Daddy told us you're not allowed to drink. He said we should tell him if you do.'

'Daddy sounds like the fun police,' says Jamila under her breath. 'Here you go.' She passes a glass of wine that I have no intention of drinking.

'Mummy, please.' Harper comes to my side and puts her hand on my arm. 'Don't.'

'Don't be silly, honey. Why don't you guys jump back in the pool? Hm? Play that shark game again.'

I clench my thighs and will her to walk away.

Andrew had always warned that this moment would come, that it would be both dangerous and unfair to rely on the girls to keep secrets and that I would need to be ready, when the moment arrived, for the truth to emerge. But I'm nowhere near ready. We're still getting established in this community. Paige is on the cusp of making her first good friend. I have two choices here. One is to keep up the pretence that Harper is being silly, leaving her embarrassed and potentially humiliated in front of these new friends; the second is to be honest and take responsibility for my actions. But will Jamila understand that I'm a changed person? I'm sober. I *can* be trusted around children. I'm no danger to anyone.

Father Ramesh's words from the other night ring in my ears. 'Without honesty and truth-telling, you will never be free.'

With my eldest child's nut-brown eyes boring into mine, I put down the wine glass. 'Actually, Harper's right. I can't drink this. I'm sorry.' I pat my daughter's arm. 'Thank you, hon. But it's okay now. Go play in the pool while I talk to Luna's mum.'

She gives me a solemn nod before turning and scampering back to the pool. 'Last one in's a rotten egg,' she bellows and bombs into the water. Luna and Paige drop their chips and fly after her.

'Sorry about all of that.' I swing my legs around so my feet are on the ground.

Jamila waves a dismissive hand. 'Oh, don't worry. Kids. Always getting the wrong end of the stick.'

'That's just it.' I speak slowly. 'Harper was right. I can't drink and I was in an accident. A bad one, and I was over the legal blood alcohol limit.'

Jamila's eyebrows shoot up. 'Were you okay?'

'I had some injuries. Bad, but not catastrophic.'

'You poor thing. When was this? Are you all right now?'

Her concern seems genuine and, for a moment, I think about stopping right here. In the background the kids scream and splash, the sky is pure liquid flame now and it's so tempting to show her the scar on my forearm where the glass cut deep and tell her that I'm healed, in all ways. That would

be the easy way out. But the easy way is never going to give me the freedom I need. I need more. I need this woman, who I barely know, to understand me. Oh, the weight of this moment. If I can just explain it properly and get her to listen without judgement, then maybe, just maybe, there's a chance for me and my family to live freely in this community.

‘I’m fine now. Just a few scars here and there. But—’

I pause. Jamila’s head is cocked and every cell in my body screams at me to stop right here. To go no further.

‘But two people lost their lives.’ I swallow the large stone that’s jammed in my throat. ‘And because of that, I went to jail.’

Jamila’s eyes have widened, all trace of a smile has vanished and her fingers fly to her lips. ‘That’s you?’ she whispers, then recoils like she has seen something ugly. Something distasteful. ‘Oh my god. I do know you. You’re that woman.’

29

23 December

Dominic

At the final hamper-packing session, Dom walks in with his eyes down and a cap pulled low over his head. He cannot see Margaret today. He cannot possibly meet her gaze without his sister's words coming back to haunt him.

I think you know exactly.

Does he? Does he really? Because ever since that conversation he's been trying to discern exactly what she meant when she said *We can make sure that woman never hurts another child ever again.*

Because there is truly only one way to do that and it's a way that he cannot bring himself to even contemplate. It's madness. Ridiculous. Inconceivable that he, Dominic Crowe, forty-two-year-old optometrist of Newcastle, would be remotely capable of doing anything to cause the permanent maiming or death of another human being.

And yet, that's exactly what you did do.

When Margaret makes a beeline towards him, he scuttles in the opposite direction to the kitchen where lunch preparations are underway. Peter, the head chef, is at the front bench, peeling a mountain of carrots.

'Uh, hi, Peter. Need any help? The hampers are all under control.'

The head chef doesn't look up from the chopping board. 'Talk to Buzz. He'll sort you.'

Dom's momentary sense of relief is replaced by mild panic. He's pulled a typical Dom move—escaped one confronting scenario by leaping headlong into another, potentially more confronting scenario. He's like a seagull that takes evasive action to avoid a myna bird, only to find itself flying directly into the propellers of an aeroplane.

Dom shuffles towards Buzz, who is currently wielding an enormous knife over a large and scrappy hunk of meat. 'Excuse me? Hi, I'm Dominic. Peter said you might need a hand.'

Ha. The idea that Buzz needs his help is laughable. The man is a legend at

the charity. Everyone knows and loves Buzz. Or maybe they just say they love him because they're actually terrified of the 6 foot 5 inch behemoth who served a thirty-year sentence for a string of armed robberies in the eighties but turned his life around on leaving jail, becoming a bus driver and a stalwart volunteer cook for the charity. At first, Dom assumed he got his 'butcher' nickname because of his tendency to rule the meat section of the kitchen. But there've been whispers he was also a notorious hit man back in the day, and so the origin for the name remains murky.

'Grab yourself a blade, brother. Gotta get through another ten kilos of this lot.' He gestures to the ruby flesh, riven with purple tendons and white sinew. Dom's stomach gurgles audibly.

'Not squeamish, are ya?' says Buzz.

'Not really. I just ... well, I don't eat a lot of red meat.'

'Vego, eh?'

'Mostly. Bit of meat thrown in.'

'A half-arsed vego, then.'

'Something like that,' Dom mutters, then picks up a knife and a hunk of meat that he slaps down with bravado on a chopping block. A speck of blood flecks on his white shirt.

'Get yourself an apron, brother. Wouldn't want to ruin that nice white shirt of yours.'

Is Buzz smirking at him? Dom searches the bigger man's facial terrain of crevasses and marble-deep pock marks and finds nothing but sincere concern. He hands Dom an apron off the hook—a pink, floral number. There's no way Dom can wear it and maintain any sense of masculinity. The urge to stutter lurks in the back of his throat and he swallows it down.

'You know what? A bit of blood never hurt. Think I'll risk it,' says Dom.

'No, you won't, brother.' Buzz forces the apron into his hands. 'Takes a real man to wear pink.'

With the attire sorted, they get to work. Buzz's knife skills are shockingly adept. He slices through the mountain of flesh like it's nothing but butter. The secret, he says, is a freshly sharpened knife, and to cut against the grain. But there's clearly more to it than that because Dom's knife is sharp and he understands grain, but he's still twice as slow at dicing the chuck steak into two-centimetre cubes for the lunchtime casserole.

Buzz keeps up a steady patter as he works, asking Dom what made him come to the shelter as a volunteer.

'Wanting to give back to the community. Cliche, I suppose.' 'Nothing to be ashamed of, wanting to help.' Buzz hacks through a bone. 'It's why I'm here.'

'Where did you learn those knife skills?'

A shadow passes over Buzz's face and Dom's insides creak again. Of all the stupid questions to ask. He's like a kid who sees a hot poker and knows it's dangerous but touches it anyway. Sweat beads on Dom's brow and his stomach gurgles again. Meat is truly disgusting and the visual of Buzz

hacking off a human arm and slicing through an elbow as easily as he's just cut through a cow's leg bone is supremely frightening.

'S-s-s-sorry, you don't have to answer that. Bit personal.' Shit. His stutter.

'No, brother. All good. I worked in the prison kitchens. They trained me up on the knives.'

The prison gave Buzz a knife and trained him to use it? Were they mad?

'You should see me with an onion. Perfect dice in thirty seconds. Only lost a tiny piece of my pinkie.' He holds up a fist with his pinkie raised—the lack of fingernail rendering it as smooth and shiny as a bald head. But all Dom reads are the letters tattooed on his knuckles. KILLR.

He gulps.

'So whadda you do, Dominic?'

'I'm an optometrist.'

'An eye-doctor, eh?'

'Not exactly. We're healthcare professionals.'

Buzz shrugs like the difference between five years and ten years study means nothing to him. 'You know, I used to love reading. Took it up when I was inside. These days, can't read a bloody thing. It's all a fucken blur. My peepers are up the shit. You know how I do this?' He holds up the knife, smeared with blood. 'By feel. It's all muscle memory.'

Dom's nerves ease slightly. He can talk eyesight for days. 'It might be presbyopia, which is very common as we age.'

'Press-by-what?' Buzz's eyes bulge. 'What the fuck?'

'Most people get it as they get older. The lens in your eye becomes less flexible and it can't refocus as easily on objects that are close. Honestly, it's nothing to worry about and easily fixed with a pair of specs. Why don't you come and see me?'

Buzz throws a sideways glance that's tinged with suspicion. 'Thanks, doc. But I don't have the money for that kind of gear.'

'No charge. It's all bulk billed. And glasses can be pretty cheap. Some people buy them from the chemist but it helps if you get an eye test first.'

'Yeah?' Buzz's face eases into a craggy smile. 'Thanks, doc. That'd be a real help.' He wipes his hands on his apron and reaches beneath it for something. For the briefest moment, Dom's muscles tense because it's clearly such a practised and familiar gesture, one that comes from years of reaching for a concealed weapon.

But he's already got a weapon. The knife. So what's he reaching for under there?

Buzz produces a phone and flicks the screen. 'What's your number then, doc?'

'Oh, yes. Sure.' He rattles off his number and Buzz taps it in. Great. Now a notorious armed robber and suspected hit man of the eighties has him on speed dial. How does he get himself into these stupid scrapes?

Buzz resumes slicing and dicing. 'You remind me of someone I met on the inside.'

‘Yeah? Like a prison guard?’

The man-mountain lets out a guffaw that ripples through his body like an earthquake. ‘A screw? Shit no. They were hard bastards. Nah, this fella was a cellie for a while. Nervy sort of bloke. Bit of a spinner, but decent enough.’

‘What was he in for?’ It has to be some kind of fraud or white-collar crime. Dominic’s not fit for anything else.

‘Knocked his missus.’

‘As in—’

‘Yup.’ Buzz makes a gun with his fingers, fires it at Dom’s head. ‘Straight into the brain. He caught her cheating.’

‘That’s ... that’s awful.’

‘Yup. And bloody stupid. I get that he was fucken mad but what he did was amateur hour. He used a gun that he’d registered in his own name and no fucken gloves. Prints all over it.’ Buzz shakes his head. ‘Dickhead. First thing you do is get something clean. No history. You do the hit and you get rid of it.’ Buzz tells him this as casually as if sharing a tip on how to make perfect scones.

‘Right. Gotcha.’ Dom’s grip on the knife slides thanks to the sweat on his palms. ‘So what is it exactly about me that reminds you of your cellmate? People often tell me I remind them of someone; I think I have one of those faces.’ He’s never been told this. He has a pleasant if forgettable face that reminds no one of anyone.

‘Not your face, your hands. He was a nervy bugger, too. The kind of fella you couldn’t imagine holding a gun, let alone firing it. But he did. It’s the quiet ones you’ve got to watch. Anyone can be a violent arsehole if they’re pushed far enough. And I guess that’s what happened with Simon. Couldn’t cope with the jealousy so he got the gun and knocked her. BANG.’

Dom jerks at Buzz’s powerful rendition of a gun. His grip on the knife fails completely and, for a terrifying few seconds, the blade is airborne, its trajectory unknown. Buzz throws out a protective arm to push Dom away from its path and it’s like being swiped by the tail of an Antarctic blue whale. The knife clatters to the ground a centimetre from Dom’s sneaker-shod foot.

‘And that’s why we wear boots in the kitchen, brother. A knife between the toes wouldn’t be pretty.’

‘Th-th-thank you.’ Dom is breathless from the whale-tail swipe and his near miss with the knife.

‘Don’t mention it. Can’t have you losing a toe on your first day in here. Besides, you’re doing me a favour by checkin’ my peepers. You know—an eye for an eye.’

‘An eye for a toe,’ Dom jokes weakly. ‘Though that’s really a saying about revenge, isn’t it?’

Buzz locks eyes with him. ‘Nah, brother. That’s where you’re wrong. It’s about doin’ what’s right. Not taking more or less than what you’re owed. That’s not revenge, that’s justice. The punishment has to fit the crime.’

‘And do you think it does? Generally speaking. As a man who’s ... more

familiar than most with the criminal justice system. Do you think it's fair?"

Marianne served less than two years in prison for two lives. It's not hard to understand why his sister is filled with rage. Dominic has tried mustering some but it doesn't come naturally.

'No fucken way. Not even close. The system's pathetic. The things I did ...' Buzz lets out a great guffaw that causes another tidal wave of rolling flesh up and down his body. 'They should never have let me go. But I'm taking it. I'm bloody taking it. I got given the golden bloody ticket and I'm sure as shit not giving it back for no one.'

'That's interesting you say that—'

He's about to ask Buzz what he might have considered a suitable penalty but a high-pitched, 'Dom, hello. Thought I saw you sneak past,' brings him to a halt.

'Margaret, hi. How are things?'

She stands with her hands on her hips, beaming. 'I've been looking for you everywhere. Thought you'd got away from me.'

'Uh. Well, the kitchen needed help today, so ...' He senses Buzz shifting weight and has the awful feeling he's about to call out the white lie. But when he steals a sideways glance at the BFG, he discovers the man has a bewitched smile on his face and he's looking at Margaret like she's an apparition.

'Margaret, isn't it? Remember me?' Buzz steps out from behind the counter and removes his apron in a smooth move. 'We met at the trivia fundraiser last year.'

'Of course I do. Barry. A pleasure to see you again.'

'The pleasure's all mine.' Buzz (Barry?) takes her hand in his and lifts it to the angle that suggests he might kiss it, which he doesn't but there's a definite flirtatious vibe coming off the man whose vowels have now taken a rounded edge that wasn't there before.

'Lunch is smelling delicious, as usual,' she says.

'Beef bourguignon with mash potatoes and greens,' says Buzz proudly.

'Might have to stay for a plate.'

'You'd be more than welcome,' says Buzz. 'I'll fix it for you myself.'

'You really are too kind.'

Now there's silence. Buzz's puppy-dog eyes are trained on Margaret and she's looking slightly uncertain about the attention but also too polite to deflect it. 'I actually came to see Dominic. Just checking you're still coming for Christmas? He has no family,' she explains to Buzz. 'So I've asked him to spend it with mine.'

'Only a fool would reject an invitation from you, Margaret. And I can already tell that our friend Dominic is no fool.'

Shut up, Buzz. You have no idea.

'Absolutely right, Buzz. No fools here,' he jokes.

'So you're coming then?' Margaret's gaze flicks from Dom to Buzz. 'I can't stand the thought of anyone being on their own for Christmas.'

‘Heart of gold, Margaret,’ says Buzz. ‘Heart of fucken gold,’ he murmurs, then turns to Dom. ‘You heard the lady’s question? Are you going, or not?’ There’s really only one answer.

30

24 December

Marianne

‘Mummy, this is itchy. I can’t wear it.’ Paige reaches for the side zip on her dress and I make a grab for her before she can pull it off.

‘Darling, not here. Not now. Just a few more minutes and we’ll be done. You don’t want to miss your chance to talk to Santa, do you?’

The centre is packed with last-minute Christmas shoppers and even though I’ve made a booking for the Santa photo, the queue is still a mile long. Paige and Harper could not look more adorable in their matching pink and white floral dresses but I feel as itchy and uncomfortable in this place as Paige does. Since yesterday’s play date, I’ve had this sense of being watched. Judged. I cannot tell you the awkwardness of the minutes after I told Jamila about the accident. The woman was silent for too many seconds as she digested what I’d said.

‘Christ, Marianne. I wish you’d told me before.’ She’d flexed her hands to indicate the girls and I thought what she was saying was that she wished I’d told her about the accident before she let me into her home to teach her daughter piano, and then again to socialise.

‘I’m sorry, I—I didn’t know how to say it. I’m so keen for Paige to make friends, I didn’t want to ruin it by having you—I don’t know. I can’t win. If I say something then people automatically make assumptions but if I don’t, they think I’m a liar.’

‘But you accepted that drink and you’re … you’re an alcoholic. That’s what they said in the news. I remember now. You’d been drinking at home, then you got in the car and mowed down that poor old lady and her granddaughter.’ Jamila’s eyes had filled with tears. ‘How can you … How can you live with yourself?’

I couldn’t answer her so I grabbed the girls and we left, Paige and Harper desperately confused by our sudden departure. Thankfully, Andrew was home and I fell into his arms, teary and devastated.

‘Hey, hey, it’s okay,’ he whispered into my hair. ‘It’ll blow over. The kids are on holidays for six weeks now. By the time they go back to school, this will all be behind us. Maybe it’s a good thing to have it out in the open. It might be exactly what you need to feel free in this place.’

He didn’t understand. If anything, I feel more imprisoned than ever. In jail, there are surveillance cameras everywhere. You know what it’s like to be watched every second of the day? The lack of privacy is exhausting. This sense that you must constantly be on your best behaviour. The only respite from being watched were our rooms where we slept and it was the only place in which I could be my true self. To be denied privacy is a form of imprisonment that can only be understood by those who have experienced it. Walking through the shopping centre, with Jamila’s words on repeat in my brain, it’s the same sense of loss. My privacy has been breached and it feels like everyone is watching.

‘Mu-um, I’m so itchy. I think I’m allergic.’ Paige tugs at the neckline. The dress is new but it’s made of cotton so it shouldn’t be causing any reaction. Maybe I should have washed it before she put it on? Maybe there’s chemical residue? God, I’m hopeless. I should have thought of that before.

I remember, now, how my mum would dress Elli and me in some version of a matching red and green outfit to see Santa. She even bought a special ten-picture frame to display each year’s photo and now it’s up in my spare room at home. There we are, adorable in our Christmas dresses, right up until Maz is twelve and I’m five. In that last photo, we’re beaming. Elli, verging on puberty, has stretched out and slimmed down in the face but her arm is slung about my shoulders proprietorially. She sits sandwiched between the chubby me and the even chubbier Santa even though it would have made symmetrical sense for me to be on the other side. I was always a bit timid of the big, strange man with the fluffy beard but Elli was never afraid. She always kept me safe. In that photo, we are two kids, excited for Christmas, with no clue of the sadness and grief to come. The shot is redolent with childhood innocence and exuberance, a sense that’s exacerbated by five blank rectangles where the following years’ images should be. It’s as if the whole concept of Christmas ended that year, and in some ways for us it did. We still celebrated but Mum always set a place for Dad. It’s funny how the void of an empty chair can carry so much emotional weight. Mum would always make a non-alcoholic toast to him and from the age of six onwards, I never knew a Christmas without tears. At least, not until I had my own children. That’s why we’re not leaving this queue. This will be a happy Christmas. Last year, Andrew didn’t take the girls to see Santa and I don’t blame him. Too much covid around and he had enough on his plate. But we’re not going to miss out again.

‘We’re nearly there, everyone,’ I say with a cheeriness I do not feel. ‘And if you’re well behaved, I’ll take you all for an ice cream afterward. How does that sound?’

The girls cheer and the line shuffles forward.

Paige grabs my arm. 'Look, Mummy, it's Ava and her sister, Isabella, from our school.' She waves madly. 'Ava! Ava! Over here.'

My eyes are drawn to a little girl about Paige's age, dragging her mum towards us. I don't recognise either of them. 'Who's that, hon?' I say quietly into Harper's ear.

'Isabella's in my year, and Ava's in Paige's class. Her mum does reading groups.' Harper's hand creeps into mine, like she's sensing trouble. I watch Ava point at Paige and tug at her mother's hand but the woman is resisting. She makes eye contact with me, then leans down and whispers something in her daughter's ear that causes the little girl to go silent and still. Ava gives Paige a sorrowful look before she allows herself to be tugged away in the opposite direction.

'Ava, come back. Where are you going?' Paige turns to me, confused. 'Why didn't she come and say hello to us?'

At this point, my heart is splintering in a million different directions and I speak through a throat full of cotton wool. 'I don't know, sweetie. They must have somewhere to go. They probably don't have time.'

'Can we organise a play date? Ava's really nice, and her mum says I'm an excellent reader. Please, Mum. Please.' Paige tugs my hand and I blink furiously to get rid of the moisture in my eyes.

'Sure, hon. We can do that.'

But I won't. Ava's mum, lovely as she might be, will say no because I'm the parent who went to jail.

She knows.

Everyone knows.

31

24 December

Ellinor

In the garage, Andrew sits on his haunches and surveys the array of nuts, bolts, plastic tubes and bits of curved steel which, in less than two hours, should become a trampoline for the girls.

Elli stands next to him and pushes back her spectacles to read out the instructions. Again. ‘Place the T-Piece screws provided through the T-Piece and framing. Tighten with washer and place the screw cap on the end.’

‘Okay, okay, I think I’ve got it.’ Andrew holds up a large screw. ‘This is the T-Piece, right?’

Elli consults the instructions. ‘Ah, no. That’s the screw.’

‘But I need to put this into that, yes?’ He holds up a piece of sturdy plastic and a screw that looks as mismatched as Madonna and Michael Jackson on a date.

Elli takes a beat before answering. The tension in the garage is palpable. They have two hours until Maz is back with the girls, in which time they’re supposed to have completed the trampoline, which will remain hidden in the garage until tomorrow when it will magically appear in the scrubby backyard as a special gift from Santa. ‘Um, no. That doesn’t look right.’

‘Jesus Christ. It can’t be this hard.’ Andrew runs a hand through his hair. ‘Why didn’t she pay someone to do this? She never thinks.’

Elli again pauses, giving his frustration time to evaporate into the garage’s sooty air. Since arriving back in Australia, she and Andrew have largely managed to avoid being alone in a room together. But when Maz raised the trampoline project with them, Elli didn’t have the heart to say no. Her sister is trying so damn hard to make this the best Christmas ever. What right does Elli have to rain on her sister’s Yuletide parade? At least she managed to talk Margie out of bringing Dominic to Christmas Day—that could have been an absolute disaster. Her mum means well but her judgement on this issue is so clouded and Elli now understands that it’s Margie’s own battle with

alcoholism that colours the way she sees the situation. That conversation on the Nobby's headland, while initially a shock, has made so many things clearer for Elli and she knows it will for her sister. But not until after Christmas. That's when Margie will reveal her alcohol addiction. It wouldn't be right to drop such a bombshell on the eve of the big day. Her sister deserves a beautiful, smooth Christmas. After everything she's been through, it isn't much to ask and Maz was so bloody grateful when Elli agreed to help Andrew with the trampoline that it was almost guilt-inducing.

'Thanks, Elli. You're the best.' Maz had squeezed her in a tight hug. 'You'll get it done in no time, promise. You guys always work so well together.'

True to a point. Working with Andrew at Fincher and Bignall had been, without doubt, the happiest time of her working life. As a boss, he was calm and competent. He listened to Elli. He always weighed up her ideas and mostly accepted them. He was terrifyingly smart, so of course there were going to be times when his own ideas were better than hers, and occasionally he got frustrated that she did not immediately see the obvious. But she told herself it was not personal, he wanted the best outcome for the clients and he was fearsome in sticking up for their interests. One could say he walked a fine line between bullying and persuasion when it came to negotiations with opposing parties but that's what the clients wanted—a man who tested limits but didn't overstep them. Outside of work, she and Andrew also had shared interests. He liked many of the TV shows that Elli liked—*The Office*, *The Good Wife* and *Suits*—and they spent plenty of time at the coffee machine, laughing over the unrealistic portrayal of life inside a corporate legal office. In short, he was an excellent boss and someone she considered a good friend. Was there anything more to it? If she was being completely honest, yes there was. Maybe. There had been nights, just the two of them working late and alone in the office, when she had detected a look in his eye, a certain sideways glance that made her feel that if she had initiated something—a touch of the hand, a caress of the cheek—that Andrew would have responded in kind. Because that was the only way this could ever happen; he was too ethical and had too much integrity to make a move on her, his underling. The power imbalance was undeniable and it wasn't only about the optics. In her gut, Elli understood that he would not want her to feel in any way pressured into a relationship.

But Elli loved her job. She loved her working relationship with Andrew. She wanted to progress in the company. Now was not the time for messy work entanglements. Under the firm's rules, a relationship would necessitate one or both of them either leaving the company or at least changing positions. Elli was not prepared to do either, so she put her feelings to the side. It was only when Andrew sounded her out about dating Maz that she understood the mistake she had made. She still remembers that instant gut recoil, the way a rock had suddenly lodged in her throat as her boss quietly asked if she had any problem with him asking Maz for a drink. How did he not hear the changed pitch in her voice, see the flare in her eyebrows?

Because Elli kept them camouflaged. She was a person of control, diligence and hard work. Andrew had expressed, previously, a desire to settle down and have the full catastrophe—love, marriage, kids, a house in the ‘burbs’. He was closing in on forty. The time had come. Elli told herself she wasn’t ready to settle down and yet the minute Andrew raised the prospect of finding such happiness with Maz, her bodily reaction told her otherwise. She did want him but it was too late. Andrew was a great match for Maz, who would no doubt benefit from his solidity and goodness. He would fall in love with her because Maz was gorgeous and lovable. She needed him in a way that Elli did not. This was a good outcome for everyone, after all the losers her sister dated. God, it had been hard to stand by and watch Maz’s heart get ripped out again and again. That would not happen with Andrew.

This was the right outcome, a fact that was confirmed to her as the relationship progressed and exposed in Andrew an over-protective side that Elli had not witnessed in the workplace. Andrew-in-love had a tendency towards paternalism, occasionally treating Maz like a child whose emotions and behaviours were to be contained and squashed down, rather than explored and understood. But Maz didn’t seem to mind. When he labelled her dramatics as ‘silly’, it clearly hurt but she would soon concede he was right. Andrew was the fatherly figure she seemed to want but it only served to make Elli realise that she and Andrew could never have worked—she valued her independence too highly. Maz was the right choice. Minor criticisms aside, Elli did not doubt Andrew’s honesty and goodness.

At least, not until the day of the accident.

Elli lowers the trampoline instructions. ‘Why don’t we swap? You read these out and I’ll locate the bits.’

She flinches when their fingertips brush. Where once she would have interpreted this reaction as physical frisson, it now feels like a pinch of distaste. There is a conversation she needs to have with Andrew but it’s not going to be enjoyable.

Elli locates what she thinks are the right pieces and starts screwing them together.

‘So the girls seem happy?’

Andrew’s squint as he watches her work softens to something approaching a smile. ‘They’re so happy. Loving the new school, which is great. Feels like we made the right call on all of that.’ He follows Elli’s lead and picks up the next two pieces to fit together. ‘It’s seriously like Maz was never away. Everyone says kids are resilient and I wasn’t a believer, until now.’

‘And Maz? She’s settled back into home life okay?’

‘I think so. Gets a bit stressed every now and then about people finding out.’ Andrew shrugs. ‘But what can you do? The truth is painful.’

Nerves knot themselves in Elli’s stomach and her fingers slide with sweat over the steel bar. She’s been rehearsing this conversation in her head for weeks. ‘But Maz doesn’t really know the truth. Not the full truth.’

Andrew's eyes flick to meet hers. 'What are you talking about?'

'She's remembering things from the day. She's had visions of leaving the house, moments before the accident. The hypnotherapy triggered something.'

His eyes narrow to slits. 'I told her not to go. I knew it would only bring her more grief.'

'But what she's remembering is true. It happened. She thinks she's going mad, that it doesn't all quite add up. But you and I both know she doesn't have the full picture.'

'Oh yeah?' His voice is suddenly as hard as the steel in his hands. 'And what has she remembered about you and your role that day?'

'I ... I don't know. She hasn't said anything yet.'

He takes a step towards her. 'Elli, when the accident happened and Maz was lying in that hospital, you and I made an agreement about the best way forward. Now you want to go back on that when it's served us so well? We're finally getting our lives back on track and you want to blow it all up again—'

'No, but I want her to hear the truth from us. At least about the temazepam. Not the other stuff ...'

'Elli,' he begins slowly, 'what's done is done. We did what we thought was best for the family at the time. And given the situation again, I'd make the same choice. Look at us.' He flexes his hands. 'We're doing well. I can't let you ruin it all because you've had an attack of guilty conscience. I won't let you. You put that drug in her wine glass but she was the one who drank the alcohol and got behind the wheel.' He takes a step towards her, the steel bar across his body like it could be a weapon and Elli takes an instinctive step backward.

'But you let her. You knew about the sedative. You knew she wasn't fit to drive.'

'I knew nothing of the sort and if you tell her I did, I'll make you regret it.' He glowers over her, the gloom of the garage accentuating the black shadows of his face.

Elli takes another step back. She can't believe she ever had feelings for this man. A man she once knew so well but now seems a complete stranger.

32

Christmas Day

Marianne

‘Paigey, Paigey, stop, noooo.’

When a child shrieks, there is always a moment where it is unclear whether it’s derived from pain or extreme joy. But when it comes to my girls, I don’t take chances. When I hear Harper shouting, I drop the potato I’m peeling and rush outside to the deck overlooking the backyard. ‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

Down below lies Harper, flat on her back on the new trampoline and she speaks through hysterical, breathy sobs of laughter. ‘She won’t stop bouncing me.’

I suppress a smile. This is exactly what I hoped the trampoline would deliver: wild, joyous fun for my girls—and hopefully no broken bones. ‘Paige, you heard your sister. Please stop.’

But my little girl keeps jumping and every time she lands, Harper’s body is thrown in the air like she’s been shocked with defibrillator paddles, or is having some kind of seizure.

‘But she loves it. She was smiling, promise,’ shouts Paige.

‘Honey, stop. She might have been enjoying it at the start but she’s not now.’

Paige stops. Harper is still.

‘Thank you,’ I say. My two daughters—motionless on the trampoline—eye each other warily.

‘Paigey, don’t stop,’ says Harper. ‘It’s boring.’

‘See, Mum,’ says Paige. ‘I told you.’

She leaps into the air once more and Harper resumes her happy, shrill shrieks. That feeling of being a kid and being tickled till it hurt, a mix of pleasure and pain—which now I think of it sounds very much like the experience of parenting. At this very moment, my heart is full. I could not have scripted a more perfect morning for my girls—one that started at 5.30

am with a wild tearing-open of presents left in Santa sacks at the end of their beds. ‘He came, he came,’ they’d hollered through the house before leaping on top of Andrew and me.

Together on the couch and still wiping sleep from our eyes, we’d watched our girls demolish the wrapping on their gifts, Ned leaping about them in sheer joy at the colour, movement and squeals of happiness. Their smiles could not have been wider. The lounge room resembled a toy store.

‘He brought everything I wanted,’ shouted Harper. ‘Everything. This is the best Christmas ever.’

This was all I needed to hear. Everything else fell away, my worries about the parents and kids at school, all those strange memories I’d been having about the accident. What did any of that matter? I’d made my girls happy. It was the Christmas of their dreams, and mine, too. But it is not without cost. Looking down on my bouncing daughters, my eyes are gritty and sore, my stomach queasy from lack of sleep. I’d set a 3 am alarm to silently deposit the Santa sacks into the girls’ rooms, unprepared to take the chance of dropping them in at 9 pm, when there was a risk they’d catch me in the act. Did I get back to sleep after that? Given the state of my stinging eyes, probably not. My mind was too full of thoughts and questions. Would the girls be happy with their gifts? Where did I put the bonbons? Was the Christmas tablecloth clean? Where had all the good tableware ended up after the move? Would Frank and Olly be civil with each other? And what about the Christmas orphan Mum was bringing—what would he be like?

All of these thoughts kept me buzzing through the dead hours and now I’m paying for it. Never mind, I’ll sleep in on Boxing Day. All I have to do now is ensure the rest of the day goes just as seamlessly. I check my watch. 9.15 am. I dispatch greedy Ned to the laundry and allow myself a smile as strains of the Rach 2 float through the back door—George’s way of saying good morning and happy Christmas. After lunch, I’ll take him some leftover pudding; I just won’t tell him that Andrew made it.

I’ve got half an hour of dog-free and child-free kitchen time to wedge a tub of herbed butter under the turkey’s skin before it goes into the oven. The vegetables are half-peeled and the egg whites must be whipped into snowy perfection for the pavlova. Yes, it’s a lot to do but I’ve got Andrew and Elli to help, though neither is present right now. Andrew’s gone to the service station for more ice, but as for Elli—she’d made a brief appearance for the great present unwrapping then slunk off back to her room, not feeling well apparently. Hopefully it’s nothing that a couple of Panadol and a lie-down can’t fix because I don’t have time for any of my loved ones to be sick. Not today.

Today is the atonement. The fresh start. A day to bury the past. But when my husband walks through the door with a bag of ice over his shoulder, his face is grave.

‘Olly’s cancelled,’ he says, dropping it to the bench.

‘What? Why? Just him or Che and the kids as well?’ My stomach drops

and rolls, hands slick with butter that's been massaging the pink gooseflesh of the turkey.

'None of them. Olly texted Dad this morning, found out he was coming. He wants to catch up with us tomorrow instead.' My husband can't meet my gaze.

'You hadn't told him that Frank was coming to lunch?' As I wash my greasy hands, a flame of anger ignites on the fumes of disappointment and nerves in my gut. 'But I told you to tell him.'

My husband's mouth is set in a hard line and he starts smashing the bag of ice against the bench to break it up. 'You don't get it.' Ice shatters under the force of his exasperation. With me? That's not fair. None of this is my fault. 'He would have said no straight away.'

'So you chose to ambush him instead,' I say, wiping my fingers vigorously with a tea towel.

Smash goes the bag again. 'It was the only way to get them together. Olly needed the push. He's always been too weak. Never knew that the best way to handle Dad was to be strong.' Smash. Smash. 'Strength is everything.' He grunts out the words as he cleaves another chunk of ice. 'You can't show fear.'

There's a bitterness in my husband's tone that I've not heard before. 'Tough-but-fair' was always how Andrew had represented his father but maybe there's more to it? Was Frank tougher on Olly than Andrew? I don't know but I don't have time to get into it now. With four less people for lunch, the table will have to be completely re-set.

I put my hand on my husband's shoulder and feel the tension in the muscle.

'It's okay, hon. Let it go,' I say. 'We'll see Olly and Che and the boys tomorrow.'

Andrew closes his eyes and opens them. 'I just want everything to be right again.'

'Me too, hon. Me too,' I say and put my head on his shoulder. Within seconds, the doorbell rings. 'Seriously? Someone's here already?' It's still hours till lunch and I've got so much left to do. I wanted everything to be clean and perfect when everyone arrives but wrapping paper is still strewn about the living room and the kitchen looks like a bomb has hit it with dirty pans and vegie peelings all over the place. Besides that, I haven't even showered or dressed and simply threw an apron over my pyjamas to get the cooking going.

Andrew heads for the door. 'It's probably just Dad. I said he could come a bit earlier if he wanted. Have some time with the girls before the others arrive.'

'What? Why didn't you tell me?' My anger flares again. The last person I want to witness this chaos is Frank. I know he doesn't approve of me and can't forgive the accident—and I get it. He's a copper and I broke the law. Not only that, I made his son's life hell and left his two granddaughters

without a mum for nearly two years. I can see it all from his point of view but not once has he tried to see it from mine. He's never liked nor tried to understand me. Today, I was hoping to show him how I've changed and got my act together. He needs to see that I can be the wife his son deserves. But this is not the way to start. As Andrew leads his dad down the hall, I quickly ditch my apron and pull my stringy hair back into a ponytail.

'Hello, Frank. Happy Christmas. How was the drive?' I give him my brightest smile and plant a friendly peck on his cheek as his eyes rove about the messy kitchen and my dishevelled appearance. For a brief moment, after we've kissed, his nose lingers near my cheek and I detect the slightest hint of him sniffing. Shit. He's trying to smell if I've been drinking. I feel my cheeks warming with shame and frustration.

'Where are the girls?' he asks, not even acknowledging my greeting. He has a green shopping bag in his hand, stuffed with brightly wrapped presents —presumably gifts for Harper and Paige. He's always diligent in that way, but I suspect it's because giving them things is the only way he knows how to connect with them.

'Thanks for these, Dad. That's really thoughtful. I'll put them under the Christmas tree, shall I?' Andrew takes the bag from Frank's hands, not noticing my distress.

'The girls are downstairs, playing.' I turn away, blinking fiercely at the heat in my eyes. *No*, I tell myself. *Do not lose your shit*.

'Alone?' Frank's bushy eyebrows rise like spitfire caterpillars.

'It's quite safe down there. Nothing but bush and I keep the door open so I hear everything that goes on. They love having the outdoor space and Santa brought them a trampoline for Christmas.' I'm babbling now, doing my utmost to convince Frank that I'm not the crappy mother he believes me to be.

'I'll go down and say hello.' His face is stony as he turns for the French doors to the deck and he mutters words I'm not supposed to hear but which float back to me on the breeze. 'Someone has to look out for them.'

33

Christmas Day

Ellinor

The shower needs to be hotter. Ellinor angles her scalp to take the brunt of the water and turns the tap until the warmth is scalding. What is she hoping to achieve by boiling her skin? Some kind of purification? A test of her mettle? Her capacity to absorb pain? Maybe it's all those things.

She has changed her flight and will return to London tomorrow for good. For the past year, she's been trying it on for size. But this time, when she leaves, it will be with the intention that she will never live in Australia ever again.

She just has to survive this lunch, which is easier said than done. Andrew's brother is okay but his father, Frank, is a shocker and he's already here, judging by the gruff voice she heard in the hallway. It was a sound that sent a shudder through her and triggered the memory of their first meeting—Maz and Andrew's engagement party—where Frank's eyes had travelled up and down her body. 'So you're the clever one, eh?' He'd held her handshake for a tad too long. 'But maybe not clever enough,' he'd added, too quietly for anyone else to hear.

What a loaded and cruel thing to say.

In a matter of words, he'd summed up all the worst fears that Elli held about herself—that she would never be as lovable or attractive as Maz, that everyone would pity her and perceive Andrew as her 'one that got away'. In less than thirty seconds, Frank Antonio had located her hidden fears and given them a public flogging. Arsehole.

The heat is unbearable now and she switches the tap in the complete opposite direction. Through pounding, icy water, she discerns distant shrieks—the girls on the trampoline, she assumes. They're going to love that thing. Watching them open all those gifts, smiles getting wider and wider, had been almost unbearable. The joy in that living room as they oohed and ahhed over the red and green wrapped treasures. Their mum and dad watching on in

silent delight, the dog going mental with all the ripped paper. This was a family—the most fundamental and precious building block of society. This was a family that Elli could not risk shattering through her selfish need to expose what really happened on the day of the accident. Maz might remember more but there were things she could never know unless Elli revealed them, and that was not going to happen. The best thing would be for her to make a graceful exit. Go back to London and let her sister get on with her life. Encourage her to leave everything in the past. It could be dangerous to bring bones to the surface—that's what Elli had tried to convey to Margie on that headland. The idea of Dominic meeting Marianne was madness, potentially risky. Margaret insisted the man was harmless but how could she possibly know for sure? She was obsessed with this idea of him forgiving Maz, that by seeing her in her home environment, sober and functional, he would see how she had changed and find it in his heart to absolve her.

Crazy town.

If the situations were reversed and a drunk driver killed two of Elli's family, she'd never forgive them. Ever. She'd want them to die in jail. And if they got out within two years, she'd be murderous with rage.

Elli switches off the tap. Goosebumps prickle her skin and she shivers at the cold.

What her mum is asking is impossible.

34

Christmas Day

Dominic

Dominic's eyes blink open and doom settles over him almost instantly. Michael Bublé sings 'Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas' on the radio. He pulls a pillow over his head. If only he could fast-forward through to Boxing Day or even back to that terrific dream he'd been having where he and Lou were side by side on jet skis, zipping over azure-blue water and small waves like they were on bucking broncos. It's an odd dream because he's never been on a jet ski and has a general philosophical objection to what he believes are essentially gas-guzzling, noise-polluting toys for man-babies. From which dark corner of his subconscious did that dream emerge?

He hugs the pillow more tightly over his head so it's almost hard to breathe and closes his eyes to recapture the sense of wellbeing with which he woke. No good. It's not there. The visual of he and Lou having the time of their lives is as slippery as water through his hands and cannot be regathered. He rolls towards his alarm clock. 8.32 am. Michael croons on about Christmas and everyone's troubles being over. Maybe for Michael with his hot wife and gorgeous kids. There is never a time Dominic feels more alone than on Christmas morning. Were he thirty years younger, he would have been sitting round a dining table scoffing pancakes with Lou, Mum and Dad, surrounded by a plethora of new books, socks, shorts, and maybe a new tennis racquet or cricket bat. It was all so simple back then.

Can he cancel on Margaret today? Can he roll over, go back to sleep and simply pretend that none of this is happening? He lies, staring up at the ceiling until his phone vibrates. A message from Lou.

Good luck today. Be strong. Keep Mum and Rose in your thoughts.

With a groan, he wrenches off the doona and launches himself off the bed. Margaret will be here in an hour.

35

Christmas Day

Margaret

Christmas lunch calls for a bold red lip, but a bold red lip also requires a steady hand, which Margaret does not have this morning. She gazes at her reflection in the mirror. Awful. More Ronald McDonald than chic-woman-of-a-certain-age. She takes a tissue and wipes, smearing the red pigment across her skin so that it appears as if she's suffered a terrible injury to her face. In that moment, her stomach folds over itself. Is this how it was for that poor grandmother who died in Marianne's accident? Margaret drops the lipstick into the basin and holds it for support as a wave of dizzy weakness sweeps over her body. Does her daughter suffer these intrusive thoughts that come out of nowhere, from the smallest and most innocuous moments of life, and yet threaten to knock her flat every single time? Strangely, Margaret always tends to think more of the grandmother than the baby. Because they were closer in age? Or is it because her mind cannot compute the horror of such lost potential that a baby represents? An older person's passing is terribly, terribly sad but not such a shock. The loss of a baby is unspeakable and inconceivable. To contemplate her own granddaughters ... oh, her mind won't even take her there, not like it does with the grandmother.

What she's doing today is a risk. A massive risk. But not in the way Elli believes. She told her daughter at Nobbys that she would uninvite him, but she hasn't. Dominic couldn't hurt a flea. In her heart, she believes him motivated mostly by curiosity, and maybe by his own desire to put the past behind him and move on. She must believe that his meeting today with Marianne will achieve the kind of closure they all need. What Margaret would have given to have had such an opportunity to bare her soul to Jeffrey's family and seek their forgiveness. She is not a highly religious person but this whole experience of meeting Dominic at the warehouse has made her believe that fate has brought them together for a reason, at Christmas—a time of rebirth, giving and generosity to all.

She takes a damp tissue and rubs hard against her stained lips until they are clear of the blood-like pigment.

There, all done. She stands back from the mirror, her skin restored to its usual crepey paleness, the slate wiped clean.

36

Christmas Day

Dominic

‘Welcome and merry Christmas. You must be Dominic. I’m Marianne. Most people call me Maz. Pleased to meet you.’

‘L-l-likewise. Thank you for having me.’

With no glimmer of recognition, the pale but pretty woman before him thrusts out her hand and Dominic takes it, hoping like hell she ignores the sweat on his palm and the mild stutter. She looks different—darker hair, softer body. His heart booms in his ears. The flowers—roses that he bought yesterday from the supermarket—quiver in his hands. They are so close. He is touching the woman who brought unspeakable grief to his family. The monster his sister so hates. What did he expect? That Marianne had grown horns while in jail? Might still be wearing her prison-green tracksuit? She’s a person. Just a person. But if he wanted to hurt her, right now, he could and that would certainly please Lou.

‘Is Grandma here? Where is she?’ Two little girls come clattering around the corner but immediately fold into their mother’s side when they see that it is a strange man and not their grandmother at the door.

‘Oh, she’s right behind me. Just sorting some things in the car,’ he says. ‘She sent me ahead to ring the doorbell.’

‘Girls, this is Dominic, a friend of Grandma’s.’ From where they are entwined in her legs, Marianne extricates a hand from each child and takes them in hers. ‘Dominic, this is Harper and Paige.’

The smaller one, Paige he thinks, lolls in her mother’s skirts. ‘Is he like Grandma’s boyfriend?’

The comment breaks the tension and Dominic grins at the idea while Marianne emits an embarrassed laugh. ‘Goodness, no. Just a friend. They volunteer together. Gosh, sorry, Dominic.’ Marianne brings a hand to her forehead in apology. ‘Please, come in. My husband’s in the kitchen, up to his elbows in turkey. My father-in-law Frank is here, too.’

He follows her swirling skirt and gleaming dark hair down the hall. She really is very beautiful. Definitely paler than she appeared in court but that has only made her more ethereal—a quality Dominic has always found appealing in women. If he had a ‘type’ it would be in the Kate Bush vein. He pushes the thought out of his head. Not appropriate.

The closer they get to the kitchen, the more his mouth fills with saliva and his stomach squelches with nerves and hunger. The aromas of turkey, herbs, butter and roasting potatoes are almost unbearable.

‘Andrew, this is Mum’s friend Dominic.’

The husband is at the kitchen bench, hunched over an enormous glistening turkey. When he looks up, the only thing Dominic’s eyes register is the large carving knife in his hands, saw-toothed and shiny with meaty juices. If the husband recognises him, he’s potentially in deep shit. Andrew might see him as a threat—a physical threat. He might, understandably, question Dominic’s motives for weaselling his way into the home of the woman who caused the death of his mother and niece. Dominic crosses his legs, his bladder weak with a need to wee. He really hasn’t thought this through at all. How did he let Lou and Margaret talk him into this bullshit? Especially when Lou expects him to pull some kind of vigilante act.

That’s not his plan. In fact, he has no plan other than simply to survive the lunch with neither Marianne nor her husband any the wiser about their awful connection. But—and here’s something he hasn’t considered—what if someone twigs? What if it goes badly? Dominic puts his palm to his belly. Is it too late to feign illness and get the hell out of here? He genuinely isn’t feeling well at all.

Andrew squints, carving knife still in hand. ‘Dominic, hi. Nice to meet you. I’d shake your hand, but—’ He gestures towards the knife and there is no evidence of recognition. Dominic shifts his weight, feeling like a soldier who’s just leapt over the parapet.

‘Yoo-hoo, anyone here who likes Santa?’ Margaret’s voice filters down the hallway.

‘Grandma!’ scream the girls, flying out of the room and back down the hall.

Marianne straightens her skirt and smooths down her hair. ‘Excuse me for a moment, Dominic, while I help Mum inside. Andrew—it might be a good time for a drink? My sister’s around, somewhere. Maybe out on the deck, monitoring the cheeses. And Frank’s in the living room. Please introduce yourself.’

She’s already out of the room before Dominic can answer. The husband moves to the fridge.

‘Right, so, what would you like? Soft drink, beer, wine, champagne? We’ve got it all.’ He sweeps open the door to reveal a fridge stocked full of bottles, then calls out over his shoulder, ‘Dad, do you want a drink?’

‘Beer if you’ve got it,’ calls back a voice from around the corner. Dominic takes a peek and registers a man with a Jabba-the-Hutt style presence sitting

on the couch. Large and lizard-like. Exceptional jowls. Waiting for his beer.

Something stirs in Dominic's gut and it's more like the seedlings of irritation and anger, rather than nerves. He's not sure what he'd been expecting in the home of a recovering alcoholic at Christmas but it was not a fridge groaning with booze. Have these people learnt nothing? Dominic himself has barely had a drink since the accident, now that he understands the havoc that alcohol can wreak.

'Dominic?' Andrew waits at the fridge. 'You look more like a wine or champs man. Which one shall it be?'

Is that a micro-aggression about Dominic's masculinity? His irritation stirs again. 'I don't want to make you open a bottle if I'm going to be the only one.'

'It's Christmas, Dominic. You won't be drinking alone. How about we start with the bubbles? I've bought this one especially.' He pulls out the bottle of Veuve Clicquot and pops the cork without spilling a drop. He pours two glasses and hands one to Dominic.

'Cheers. And welcome.' Andrew downs the lot in one go. 'Oh, hey, Elli. There you are. Like a champs? Have you met Dominic?'

Elli startles and does not smile, even as she accepts the champagne flute from Andrew and takes a large gulp. 'I didn't think you were coming.'

What does that mean? The inflection suggests she doesn't want him here. Christ. Does she know who he is? Do they all know? What the hell has he gotten himself into here?

'Margaret is a difficult woman to refuse,' he says.

'Tell me about it,' Elli mutters and inclines her glass towards Dominic. 'Well, here's to a merry Christmas.'

Andrew joins them. 'And a happy, healthy new year.'

They all force smiles and drink.

37

Christmas Day

Margaret

'That was really delicious, Marianne, thank you.' Margaret sets her cutlery together on the plate. 'You'll have to give me the recipe for that pea and bacon salad. What a fabulous combination. So clever. I loved the entire meal.'

'You must have, given you ate it in five seconds flat.' Elli speaks in a low voice, but loud enough for most of the table to hear. Margaret senses her cheeks flushing. It's true. She did gulp the food and not only because of its deliciousness but because she wants to get to the other side. She's desperate to talk to Dominic and see what he makes of all of this, and most particularly, to see what he makes of Marianne. Does he see what Margaret sees—a young mother working incredibly hard to atone for the awful mistakes she has made? Surely he cannot help but be moved by this to understand that she is not the monster the media made her out to be. He must forgive her.

'I didn't eat breakfast because I knew Marianne would have a feast prepared. You outdid yourself today, darling. So proud of you. Cheers to the chef.'

The rest of the table raises their wine glasses in a murmured cheers.

Marianne sips from a water glass. 'Thanks, Mum. Appreciate it. But I did have plenty of help. Andrew basted the turkey and did the potatoes.' She lightly touches his hand and gives him a smile that warms Margaret's heart. This is what she wants to see—her daughter and son-in-law working as a happy harmonious team. Is Dominic taking note of everything? How Marianne is conscientiously drinking water while the rest of them (Margaret excluded of course) enjoy fine reds, whites and French champagne.

'They were top notch. Incredibly crispy,' says Margie.

'Duck fat and parboiling. That's the key.' Andrew speaks with his knife raised in the air.

‘Two big gold stars for Marianne and Andrew. What a perfect pair.’ Ellinor raises her glass and Margaret spears her with a sharp glare. There’s a slur to her older daughter’s voice that suggests she’s overindulged in the fine wines.

‘Never thought a son of mine would be giving out cooking tips.’ Andrew’s father, Frank, speaks through a mouth full of food. ‘People crap on about food like it’s god’s bloody gift. Can’t stand those telly shows where they rave about cooking with love and how food changes the world. Bullshit. Grub is grub.’

‘But food does bring people together. And cooking for others can be a love language,’ says Dominic.

Good on you, Dominic. You tell him.

Margaret’s never liked Frank. How can he possibly be responsible for half of Andrew’s genetic material when the two could not be more different? Frank had always struck her as an egotistical bully, the kind that would rule a household with an iron fist, figuratively speaking. Not openly violent, so much—he was almost too clever or controlled for that—but a man who inspired fear.

Andrew’s father grunts and shoots a *who-asked-you* look but Dominic carries on. ‘My mother was a brilliant cook and it’s one of the things I miss most about her, especially at Christmas. She would cook for days in the lead-up. It was absolutely a labour of love.’

‘She sounds like a wonderful woman,’ says Marianne warmly. ‘What was her name?’

Margaret freezes. *Don’t say it. Don’t say it.*

‘Dolly. Everyone called her Dolly.’

She exhales. Dolly must be a nickname. Dianne is not the *most* unusual of names but uncommon enough that it would trigger something in Marianne’s brain. Much as she has dreamt about a moment where Dominic and Marianne can speak frankly, she does not want it to happen with a cast of thousands watching on. Particularly not the children. What she’s hoping is that Andrew’s father will leave early, as he normally does, and Margaret will get her chance to speak with Dominic and discover whether he has it in his heart to forgive Marianne.

First things first. They need to get through this meal and get Frank on his way.

Margaret stands. ‘Who’s for pudding then?’

38

Christmas Day

Marianne

I'm nearly there. The lunch has been served and hailed a massive success, mostly by Mum whose open bias possibly negates some of the praise. But I'll take it. Relatively fresh from prison, I've delivered a hot meal of roast turkey, warm glazed ham, roasted veg and salads—a feat widely regarded by most home cooks as the Tetris of cooking when you only have one oven at your disposal.

Mum's now in the kitchen, hovering over the pudding that boils away in the pot. From next door, it seems George is already on to his second playing of Handel's *Messiah*. The girls have gone out back to jump on the trampoline. Frank is starting to check his watch. At the other end of the table, Elli and Dominic are discussing law and optometry. He's a nice guy. Could there be something there between him and Elli? She's talking about going back to London but I'd love her to stay. Talk her into doing IVF, with my egg and a donor sperm. I'm desperate to do this for her after all she's done for me. My eyes heat up just thinking about her love for me. Her loyalty. Tomorrow I'll talk to her about my memory of us arguing on the day of the accident but no doubt there's a straightforward explanation.

'Just off to the loo,' I say to no one in particular. In the bathroom, I lock the door and survey my reflection in the mirror. A little flushed in the cheeks. Lipstick could use a redo, but nothing drastic. I grab the shower stool and go to the storage cupboard where we keep a mountain of toilet rolls and spare towels. Hopping onto the stool, my hand extends into the far reaches of the top shelf until it locates the smooth glass bottle in the back corner.

In front of the mirror, I unscrew the cap. Vodka may not have a particular aroma like whiskey or gin but contrary to popular opinion, it does emit the bitter fumes of alcohol. After a modest gulp or two, I attend to my make-up and swish some toothpaste around my mouth. If anyone smells my breath, they'll get mint rather than alcohol. For a moment, I sit on the toilet seat and

allow the relaxing warmth of the vodka to flow up from my toes, and into my legs and chest. Any residual nerves about today are gone. I've done it. I've managed to pull off a beautiful, happy Christmas and if that doesn't deserve a drink, I don't know what does. I've been careful to space my bathroom visits over the course of the day. But the alcohol has certainly done its job. I've been the model hostess throughout, calm, polite, relaxed—even when Andrew pulled out the turkey way too soon and turned off the oven, completely forgetting that the vegetables needed a reheat.

A major disaster? In most people's eyes, no. But they're not me. What they've never had to understand is how one little mistake can set off a catastrophic chain reaction. A butterfly in the Amazon type scenario. It starts with premature turkey removal and ends with hospital admission thanks to salmonella poisoning from undercooked poultry. But that is not happening today. Under the gaze of my nearest and dearest I am meeting the Christmas challenge more than admirably. I am back to my best self. Almost.

For a second I let my mind wander to the other family. Dianne's daughter. Little Rose's mother. What would she be doing right now? I close my eyes and into my brain flicks a vision of her—Louisa was her name, from memory—and she's sobbing at the Christmas table. There's an empty seat to one side of her and an empty highchair to the other. A cramp forks across my stomach and the vodka re-forms like fire in the back of my throat. For a second, I think I'm going to vomit. But I swallow and swallow again and blink furiously to rid my mind of Louisa and her sadness.

Only when I'm sure she's gone do I lean back against the cistern. I'm so tired, so very tired. I feel myself drifting into that strange, half-dreaming state where the red-blackness behind my eyes starts to fill with dream-like images.

For a moment, I think I can hear shouting but the sound is muffled and distant and I cannot be sure if it's coming from the dining room or from the strange video starting to play in my mind but it must be the day of the accident because I'm wearing the fuchsia top and I've just come back to our Newcastle home after lunch with some girlfriends during which I had a couple of wines, but nothing to put me over the limit. I pull into our street and see that Elli's car is parked outside. My initial thrill at the prospect of seeing my lovely sister gives way to confusion. What is she doing here in the middle of the afternoon when she'd usually be at work? Has something happened? Is it bad news about Mum? My heart goes *staccato* and my hands *glissando* on the steering wheel as I pull into the driveway. The garage door opens but instead of rolling forward I slam on the brakes. Andrew's black Volvo sits, idling. He's home too. Now my heart really starts to race. Is it one of the girls?

I bolt inside and head towards raised voices out the back.

'Please, Elli, listen to me. I made a mistake.'

That's Andrew. Something in his tone causes me to stop. His volume is elevated but he's not agitated or panicked. It's his lawyer voice—the one he

uses when he's trying to persuade. My pulse eases. Whatever they're discussing, it's not an acute emergency but it's certainly serious.

'This is inappropriate, Andrew, and you need to stop. I came because you said you wanted to talk about Maz and how to help her. I'm not here to rake over ancient history. You made your choice years ago and it was the right one, for all of us. My sister loves you and you love her. You've got two beautiful little girls. I couldn't have given you that—I couldn't give anyone that. I love my job and I'm not ready to sacrifice it. It's why you were drawn to Maz. We missed our moment and I've made peace with that. This is the way it was supposed to go.'

Breath catches in my throat. *We missed our moment.* What is Elli saying here? That she had feelings for Andrew? That something happened between them? I inch forward to get a better view, conscious of not breathing, not doing anything to disrupt the conversation until I've heard more. In the backyard, Andrew and Elli stand eye to eye with little space between them. My husband looks wretched as he places his hands on my sister's shoulders.

My legs weaken. I know what's about to come because it's written in the way he's holding Elli. Part of me wants to put my fingers in my ears and scream. But I know I have to hear what he's about to say. I gulp at the air and squeeze my eyes shut.

'I love you. I think I've always loved you. I ... I don't know why I didn't see it then, but I do now. Clear as day.'

I flatten my back to the wall for support, needing something solid to keep me standing. My legs are water. My chest aches. It's one thing to know that a gut punch is coming, but it doesn't make it any less painful.

'You don't love me. You're having a rough spot in your marriage. That's all this is. Marianne needs help, even I can see that. The drinking ... It's ... it's getting dangerous. That's what you need to focus on right now. Getting help for your wife. I can support you with that.'

'You're not listening, Elli—'

'No. You're not listening. You're being selfish. You cannot break up your family. What about Harper and Paige? What would it do to them?'

My girls. My precious girls. Tears wet my cheeks.

I don't know but I can't go on like this. It's miserable. We're both unhappy but Maz isn't strong enough to leave.'

'Okay. I've heard enough and I am going. You know what? You're a selfish prick. How are we supposed to work together now? Did you even think about that before you decided to bare your soul?'

'Elli, wait—'

But my sister is not waiting. Her footsteps on the floorboards are getting closer. She's heading straight towards where I'm standing. With any luck, she'll stride straight past me without a second glance. I suck in my sobs and press myself against the wall. She passes me without looking back and I'm sure she's going to keep walking. But her head inclines towards the kitchen bench, to where I've slung off my handbag. She stops, turns. Her hand

reaches for her mouth. Horror is written on her face as she digests the things I've heard.

‘Oh, Maz. No. Oh, god. No.’

*

My head jerks off the cistern and I come to in the bathroom with a gasp. How long have I been asleep? Why did I wake? My mouth is dry and when I get to my feet the room swings dangerously. I reach for the towel rail. My husband told Elli he loved her. That's why we argued. Bile rises in my throat and I swig water from the tap to get rid of the acid burn.

Something's going on in the backyard. There's George's music but there are also voices filtering through the window. Adult and child. The girls on the trampoline again? Andrew's dad having a smoke? I run my hands under the water and rub them on the towel. How am I supposed to face them after what I've just remembered? My husband's betrayal. My sister's lies. I can't confront them now, not in front of Mum and Andrew's father. Not in front of the girls and Dominic.

Just get through the lunch. Bring it up when everyone's gone, when the girls are in bed.

But another thought leaps into my mind.

After Elli found me, what happened next?

But the thought is pierced by the sound of a child screaming. High-pitched and shrill. A child in pain. I drop the towel and run.

39

Christmas Day

Ellinor

Elli takes the stairs down to the backyard two at a time.

Please be okay. Please be okay.

‘Owwww. It hurts. It hurts so bad.’ Slumped on the trampoline, Harper cradles her elbow, her face red and blotchy. Tears streaming.

‘I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. It was an accident. Promise.’ Paige crouches by Harper’s side, close enough to get a good view of her sister’s agony but far enough away to avoid a revenge blow. Champagne, wine, turkey, too many potatoes and an excess of peas jangle in Elli’s stomach. This is her fault. She was supposed to be watching the girls. She should have known the game was getting out of hand. Should have stepped in. Maz is going to kill her.

Elli clammers through the gap in the mesh onto the trampoline. ‘Where does it hurt? Your elbow, just here?’ Even though Elli’s touch is light as a feather, Harper cries out in pain.

‘What’s happened down there? Need the first-aid kit?’ Andrew shouts down from the deck above. Margaret’s next to him, worried and clutching the railing. No sign of Maz or Dominic—or Frank, thank goodness.

‘Maybe we need a sling?’ Elli calls back. ‘There’s no blood.’

No blood but a supremely traumatised child who is sobbing and moaning with pain.

‘It’s okay, Harps. Auntie Elli is here. You’re safe. You’re going to be okay.’

‘I think it’s broken,’ she moans. ‘How do we know if it’s broken? I want Mummy.’

‘Can you move it at all? Maybe try to stretch it out.’ Frankly, Elli has no idea and the last thing she wants to do is cause her niece further pain. Damn, why didn’t she step in and get the girls to tone down their rough play?

‘Should I get some ice?’ calls Margaret from above. ‘Or water? Should I come down?’

‘Could you find Maz? Harper’s asking for her.’

Paige goes to put her arm around her sister's good shoulder. 'Harper, if your arm is broken will you let me sign your cast?'

'Nooooo,' she wails. 'I don't want my arm to be broken. I'll miss everything in the holidays. Where's Mummy?'

Great question. Where the hell is Maz? She's been an awfully long time in the bathroom.

'It's okay, Harps,' calls Maz from the deck. 'Mummy's coming. I'm here, darling.'

Her sister flies down the stairs. 'Slow down, Maz. She's okay. Be careful.'

But Maz does not slow. Skirt hitched up, she reefs herself through the mesh and onto the trampoline. 'What happened? Where does it hurt, darling?'

Maz cradles Harper's head into her chest while the child clutches her elbow. 'Paigey bounced me too high. I asked her to stop but she wouldn't.'

'You did not. Big fat liar,' says Paige, her peachy cheeks puffed out in indignation.

'Am not.'

'Are too.'

'Am not.'

'Girls, please. Stop. This is not helpful.' Maz's forehead creases with worry. 'Was anyone watching you?'

'Auntie Elli was on the deck,' says Harper.

'She told me to jump higher,' says Paige.

That little bugger. 'That's not exactly true,' says Elli.

'You asked me how high I could jump and I was showing you,' says Paige.

'If I knew Harper wasn't enjoying it I would have told you to stop. I didn't hear her tell you to stop.'

Because she was laughing her head off. Right up until she hurt herself.

'So now you're blaming the children?' Maz turns on Elli, her eyes alight with fury. 'You were supervising them. They were in your care. They're just little girls. This is all your fault. Harper could have broken her neck.'

Elli is stung. Where has this irrational fury come from? 'I'm sorry but it was an accident. It could have happened whether I was watching or not.'

'You have no idea what it takes to be a mother—'

'Now you're being ridiculous.'

'Mummy, Mummy.' Harper tugs Maz's sleeve. 'It's feeling a bit better now.' She extends her arm and retracts it. 'See, I can bend it. Please don't be angry with Auntie Elli. It wasn't her fault.'

'Everything all right down there? Is it time for pudding? Girls, I've got pavlova for you. Who wants to whip the cream?' Margaret's interruption breaks the tension and the girls shout 'me' in unison and scramble off the trampoline.

'Look, I'm really sorry, Maz. I should have been watching more closely but I honestly thought they were fine.' Her sister won't look at her. 'Maz? Maz?' She goes to touch her sister's arm and Maz jumps like she's been

electrocuted.

‘Don’t you dare touch me.’ Her eyes are wild and glassy. ‘I know what happened,’ she hisses. ‘You lied to me.’

‘I haven’t lied to you. If I thought the girls were in danger I would have stepped in. It was an accident, pure and simple. You know what kids are like. Accidents happen.’

‘Not the trampoline, the other accident.’ She gets to her feet but stumbles and her arm flings out to the netting for support.

‘Calm down. Talk to me.’ Elli moves closer and that’s when the smell hits her—bitter and dank and unmistakable. ‘Maz.’ She speaks quietly though her heart is roaring with disappointment. ‘Have you been drinking?’

‘So what if I have? What would you care? You’d love that, wouldn’t you? Then you could have them all to yourself—the girls, Andrew, all of it.’ Her sister lolls back into the mesh, which bulges under her weight. She half closes her eyes and moans the words through clenched teeth. ‘I remember now. I remember the day.’

‘The day of the crash? What have you remembered?’

Her eyes flick open, white and wide. ‘That you were there. That my husband said he loved you.’

40

Christmas Day

Dominic

Dominic checks his watch, again. 3.05 pm. Only ten minutes have passed since the last check. Has time slowed down? He has never wanted so much for a lunch to be over. It's not that the event itself has been awful. Quite the contrary. The meal was absolutely delicious and Elli has been an enjoyable dining companion. After her initial brusqueness, he's found her easy to talk to—smart and funny. Under different circumstances ...

He stops the thought in its tracks. The circumstances will never be different. She will always be the sister of the woman who killed his mother and niece.

‘Drags on, doesn’t it?’ Frank picks at his teeth with a toothpick, pulling his lips back into a snarl. He is an unpleasant man, taciturn and abrupt—unlike his son who, despite his minor insult against Dominic’s masculinity, has been the model host, keeping glasses filled and carving with aplomb. Occasionally, there’s a tightness in Andrew’s jaw that suggests it’s a show that requires a degree of effort.

But that’s understandable. Certainly Dominic is feeling the strain of pretending. He can’t muster the energy or inclination to say a single word to Frank and the room falls into awkward silence. It is only the two of them still sitting at the table. Everyone else has rushed off to the back deck because of some kerfuffle with the children. Dominic doesn’t want to get involved. The fewer entanglements he can have with this family, the better.

Why is he even still here? There’s nothing to stop him walking out the front door and never coming back, except for the fact that Margaret has driven him and it would be a two-day walk home. Then there’s the rudeness of it all. He simply doesn’t have the guts to cause offence in that way. What a loser he is. Andrew’s father has closed his eyes and appears to be nodding off to sleep.

‘Pudding time,’ sings Margaret. Tailed by the two little girls, she sweeps

across the room towards the kitchen—a picture of focus and busy-ness as she issues directives over her shoulder. ‘Harper, you find the bowl. Paige, you get out the mixer.’ She pauses. ‘I left something in the car. Dominic, perhaps you could help me?’

‘For sure.’ He stands quickly—anything to get him out of this awkward twosome in which he’s found himself at the table.

‘Anyone need a sling?’ Andrew appears in the kitchen, holding a first-aid kit.

‘I’m fine, Daddy,’ says Harper.

‘Andrew, you can supervise the cream whipping,’ directs Margaret.

Dominic follows Margaret through the house while the girls peel off towards the kitchen, chatting excitedly about whipping cream and how big their slice of pavlova will be.

‘Are they okay?’ he says quietly to Margaret. What had that backyard ruckus been about? He’d assumed it was a trampoline injury, but that can’t be right. They seem fine now.

‘Oh, yes. Just children overdramatising. You know what they’re like.’

Not really. Your daughter killed the only child in my life.

He must stop having these thoughts. He is sensing in himself a growing resentment towards this family that he hasn’t felt to this point. If anything, he felt more sympathy when Marianne was a stranger to him. From afar, he could imagine her as a slightly broken woman rather than this hostess-with-the-mostest thing she has going on. Where is Lou right now? Sitting in queasiness at home, alone with Tao and counting the minutes until this day is over. That’s where Dominic should be, by her side. Instead, he’s here, stickybeaking on a family for reasons he cannot fathom.

Margaret bleeps her car to unlock. Dominic feels something inside of him stir. Something like courage, or maybe the kindling of mild rage.

‘Uh, Margaret. I know it’s a bit inconvenient. But … ah. I’m not feeling very well.’ He pats his stomach for effect. ‘I’m wondering if we might be able to leave soon?’

Her head whips around. ‘Now? You want to leave now? Before dessert?’

‘I’m … I’m sorry, but my stomach isn’t quite right. I don’t think I could eat dessert, even if I wanted to.’

‘You can’t leave now. We haven’t had pudding.’

What is it with this woman and her sweets? Her face is stony. Maybe she does need the sugar hit. ‘No. Right. What if I wait out here in the car until you’re done? I wouldn’t want to leave the family with gastro—not a nice Christmas gift.’ He makes the terrible joke as a peace offering, hoping Margaret will take pity on him. It’s not a total lie. He does feel sick to his stomach, but he suspects the illness is more emotional than physical.

‘You have to come back inside.’ Margaret gets close, right in his face, and clutches his arm. If he does have an infectious virus, she is unafraid of catching it. But there’s a particular intensity to her tone and gaze that suggests this is about far more than dessert. Dominic’s stomach gurgles. His

mouth is bitter with saliva that he cannot swallow.

‘I ... I don’t understand.’

He tries to disentangle his arm but Margaret’s grip tightens further. ‘You have to talk to Marianne. You have to tell her who you are.’

The hairs rise on the back of his neck. His stomach drops to the grass. The world tilts sideways. ‘Wait. Hang on. You know?’

‘Of course I know,’ she hisses. ‘I knew the moment I met you.’

He’s so confused. His brain fizzes with thoughts. Margaret knows he is Dianne’s son and Rose’s uncle, she has known it all along? Just how good an actress is this woman? She never betrayed any inkling at all that she knew. He’s been conned. Hoodwinked, when all this time, he thought he was the one perpetuating the fraud.

‘Does Marianne know?’ He swallows hard.

She shakes her head. ‘She has no clue, or Andrew.’

‘I don’t understand. Why didn’t you say something? Why didn’t you tell me you knew? Why am I here?’

‘That’s an excellent question, Dominic.’ Her gaze narrows. ‘Why are you here? You’re surprised that I lied; well what about you? Admit it; you also knew who I was the moment we met. But you said nothing, just as I said nothing. The only difference between us is that I have a better poker face.’

She’s right. They’ve both lied. But Dominic is not cut out for this. Sweat trickles down his back and the cicada roar is dizzying. He reaches out to the car for support.

‘I honestly don’t know. Initially, I was curious and wanted to meet Marianne and Andrew and observe how they were getting on. Then I told my sister and she really wanted me to come. She’s so ... broken.’ He pauses, uncertain what to say next. ‘I think she wanted me to ... to hurt Marianne in some way and for a second I thought maybe I could do that but ...’ He stops again, mostly to regather his breath which has become ragged. ‘I’m a coward. I’ve always been a coward. I was kidding myself to believe it might be different and I think the best thing now would be for me to leave.’

He goes to get his phone but finds Margaret’s grip has redoubled and accessing it is impossible.

‘You can’t. You have to speak to Marianne. You have to tell her she’s forgiven.’

‘Forgiven? I don’t understand—’

‘For the accident.’ Margaret’s voice is insistent, too loud for the quiet street. ‘She’s paid her price. She’s served her sentence. But she’s still punishing herself. Tying herself in knots to make up for what she did. You can see that, can’t you? You’re a kind man. You have to forgive her for what she did. It’s the only way.’ Her eyes are wild and flash with an intensity that stirs irritation in Dominic. Where’s the smart, kindly woman he met at the warehouse and who is this crazed harpy who won’t let go of his arm? What right does she have to put all this pressure on him? His thoughts are becoming chaotic and clouding like the sky overhead, like it’s gearing up for

a storm. The air fizzes with pre-lightning static.

‘Margaret, you need to let go. You’re working yourself up into a state. It’s not healthy. Now, I’m going to organise an Uber and—’

‘Please, don’t. Stay. We need this. I need this. You don’t know what it’s like to carry this burden of guilt.’

Something inside of Dominic cracks. It’s a cleaving of the earth, two tectonic plates smashing together and disgorging an explosion of rage-filled lava. ‘You think I don’t know?’ He rips his arm from her grasp. ‘You think I don’t understand what guilt feels like? I wake up every day with this weight on my chest that crushes my lungs.’ He beats a fist to his chest. ‘I *don’t* blame your daughter for what happened. I blame myself. It was me. I was the one who stuffed up. *I* was the one who was supposed to be looking after Mum and Rose. *I* was the one who wasn’t watching. *I* was the one who left the door unlocked.’

Every time he says the word ‘I’ he beats his chest. He deserves the pain. He deserves the hurt. The salt of his tears stings his skin and that’s good, too. More hurt. He slumps into the gutter, buries his head in his hands, submits to the misery. ‘My sister blames me. And you think I don’t know the importance of forgiveness,’ he says with bitterness. ‘But I live with it every day.’

He hides in the dark cave of his arms, overwhelmed with the sorrow that’s been threatening to drag him under for two years. What a loser he is. A complete and utter loser. No one will ever love him because he doesn’t deserve it. He doesn’t deserve anyone.

All right. Now, this is weird. There’s an arm around his shoulder and human warmth by his side.

‘Here, here. Shush, shush now. It’s all right.’ Margaret speaks as if she were hushing a baby.

That’s what he is—a giant, snivelling, pathetic baby. The thought makes him cry harder. ‘I have to tell you what happened,’ he sobs.

‘All right, shush now.’

He disentangles himself from her embrace, wipes his wet face. ‘You need to understand.’

He lets his mind spool back two and a bit years ago to that day, that moment where he’s splayed out on the couch and scrolling mindlessly on his phone to keep himself awake. The rich beef roast has taken full effect and the only way that this lunch can be any more pleasant would be for him to have a thirty-minute kip, right here on the couch in his childhood home. On one side of him sits his mother, mouth open and snoring softly. She’s been pretty good today. Relatively lucid and aware of who they all are and why they’re here—to celebrate Rose’s first birthday, their final celebration in the family home. Dianne hasn’t mentioned her boyfriend, Jose. (The staff at the home have told them she dolls herself up nearly every day for a ‘date’ with him. The first time it happened they rang a nonplussed Lou to clarify the existence of a Jose. The quick conclusion was he was a figment of her plaque-riddled mind.) A couple of times she’s asked where Dad is and they’ve told her he’s

out in the garage getting drinks from the fridge, which has proven a satisfactory response. With a slight easing in covid rules, Lou and Tao had been able to invite a few mates, including some of their parents' friends, to celebrate Rose and say goodbye to the house. Dominic should have bought his niece a roll of wrapping paper rather than the light-up-and-learn musical activity table that Lou had told him to buy 'for her sensory development'. But what better sensory experience than a roll of wrap to rip and destroy? Watching his niece's eyes light up as she tore with glee gave him a feeling of warmth and wellbeing that did so much to assuage the gaping loss he felt at his mother's growing diminishment. It was the circle of life, he concluded. One flame flickering out while another was just bursting into being. Next month the house would go on the market. This would be his last memory-making experience in the family home and it had been a great way to end.

Sitting on the couch, Dominic yawned with satisfaction as Lou bustled in, wielding leftover birthday cake. His mother snored again and Rose kicked up her chubby legs in the pram parked next to him.

'You guys okay here for a minute? Tao and I need to take some stuff out to the car. And I've got some cake for Val.'

Val was their elderly spinster neighbour across the way.

Dominic went to get up. 'Here, let me.' Val was a sweet old stick. He'd be happy to say hello or help Tao with the baby gear. New parents did not travel lightly.

Lou gave him a tired smile. 'You stay here. Spend some quality time with Mum and Rose.'

'You sure? You look exhausted.'

'I'm sure.' She'd leant against the doorframe for a moment—a dreamy look on her face that he'd not seen before. Motherhood had softened her in the nicest way. 'You all look so content where you are.' At that moment, Rose gurgled again and blew a raspberry. 'See,' Lou laughed. 'She agrees. You all stay right where you are.'

'Shall do.' Dominic gave a mock salute as his sister's smile faded to a frown.

'But seriously, keep an eye on them. Maybe lock the back door, just in case. You never know ...' Her voice trailed off.

'I've got it, Lou. I am holding the fort.' He gripped the couch. 'See, here I am. Holding it.'

Lou left and Dominic got out his phone to film Rose blowing another raspberry—for what reason he didn't know. He wasn't active on social media accounts and it wasn't the sort of thing he could send to mates and colleagues. He put the phone down. Rose's eyes were closing. God she was cute. Those long, slow blinks like she couldn't bear to miss a minute of life. Mesmerising. His mother let out a fluttery snore. His niece shuddered and clenched her fists to her ears and turned her head, finally asleep. Dominic's eyelids were heavy. So, so heavy. He would close them for a moment, just while Mum and Rose slept.

Who could say how long it was? Two minutes? Twenty? The next thing he knew was Lou jostling him awake. ‘Hey. Where are they?’

Dominic rubbed his eyes. ‘Where’s who?’

‘Mum and Rose?’ She stood, hands on hips. ‘Where’d they go?’

‘They were just here, asleep. Maybe Mum’s in the toilet, I don’t know.’

Lou gave him a look but left the room, calling out ‘Mum, Mum’ as she went to the bathroom. Dominic went in the other direction, towards the kitchen, but ran into a harassed-looking Tao in the hallway.

‘What’s going on? What’s all the shouting?’

‘We can’t find Mum and Rose.’

‘Weren’t you watching them?’ Tao looked genuinely confused.

Lou joined them in the hallway. ‘He was but he fell asleep.’ She shook her head. ‘If anything’s happened to them ...’

‘I’m sure they’re fine. Don’t stress.’ Tao took her by the shoulders. ‘Has anyone checked the garden? Maybe your mum took her out there?’

Dominic had to stop himself from breaking into a run as they trooped down the corridor. Outside, the sun was still high in the sky and belting out rays of heat and light. Dominic ran a tongue around his top lip, salty with sweat. His eyes swung back and forth. The three of them separated like atoms in a nuclear explosion and headed to all points of the garden but Dominic understood in his gut it was futile. Where could you hide in a backyard that was nothing but a square patch of grass ringed by shrubbery, a shed in the corner. Where the hell could they be?

‘Not in here.’ Tao emerged from the shed. ‘Could she have wandered out the front door?’

‘I deadlocked it from inside. She would have needed a key,’ said Lou.

‘Is there any way of getting out of this backyard?’

Lou and Dominic exchanged glances and without a word they took off around the side of the house to the passage that led onto the street. And there it was—the side gate, as wide open as a gaping jaw.

‘Oh my god, no.’ Lou rushed forward and onto the street, Dominic and Tao close behind. ‘Mum, Mum, where are you?’

The three of them stood in the middle of the road, lost and helpless.

In the distance, a siren began to wail.

41

Christmas Day

Margaret

‘Now … now you know.’ Dominic rests his elbows on his knees, lets his head sink forward into the gloom cast by the shadow of Margaret’s car. ‘It wasn’t all Marianne’s fault. It was mine, too.’

He is utterly wretched and great waves of guilt crash over Margaret in a rolling set, one after the other. How selfish she has been. She has seen Dominic as a vehicle for one thing and one thing only: helping Marianne. She had imagined that, in spite of his grief and loss, he held some moral superiority over them all. In her wilder moments, she had wished to swap places with him—yes, grief could be unbearable but it did evolve and lessen over time, whereas guilt was an insidious and lonely experience that ate at your soul and attracted no sympathy. When you lost a loved one, you received flowers and casseroles. When your loved one was arrested, you received death threats and hate mail. This was a crime in which Dominic was pure victim, utterly blameless, a kind of martyr, or so she had thought. Now, she sees how this terrible, terrible accident has been like a stone thrown into a pond from which the ripples of guilt have flowed outward in concentric, expanding circles, consuming all in its wake.

‘Dominic. I’m so, so sorry. I had no idea.’ She squeezes his shoulder.

‘Of course you didn’t. How could you?’ He looks up at her, cheeks stained with tears. ‘My role in the accident never came up at the sentencing. Lou wouldn’t allow it. She couldn’t bear the idea of bringing evidence that would make Marianne anything less than fully responsible. But, strictly speaking, if I had stayed awake that day, this would never have happened. Or, if she’d made me pack the car, it wouldn’t have happened. Much as Lou blames Marianne, I think she blames herself as well. We all blame ourselves.’

Yes, we do.

Margaret opens her mouth to speak again and share her own failings but her words are interrupted by the distinct sound of two people shouting at

each other. Not just shouting but screaming. Two women, out of their brains with anger and possibly drunk.

You lied to me.

I only did it to protect you.

You love him, don't you?

No.

You're such a liar.

Dominic's eyebrows shoot up in question but Margaret raises a shushing finger and cocks her head in the direction of the sound. She knows those voices, of course she does.

‘That’s Marianne and Ellinor.’

Margaret doesn’t bother with going back through the house but shoots straight down the side passage that goes directly to the backyard. The volume of shouting rises as she gets closer, though Margaret won’t believe it’s her daughters until she sights them with her own eyes. She is nearly running now and Dominic is calling for her to slow down and be careful. But she’ll slow for no one, not when her two most precious people on earth are fighting with each other. The idea is so strange, so unbelievable. Her girls have never fought, not even when they were little girls and the toddler Marianne drew in thick black texta on one of eight-year-old Elli’s books, not even when the twelve-year-old Marianne borrowed her sister’s make-up without asking, nor when the fourteen-year-old Marianne stole the bottle of Midori her sister had received for her twenty-first birthday. The story of their relationship has been one of extreme tolerance on Elli’s behalf and extreme adoration on Marianne’s. Those things she did to Elli were never designed to hurt or harm, she did them out of envy. Marianne always wanted to be older, wiser, calmer. She didn’t want Ellinor’s *things*—she wanted to *be* her.

Now they are brawling as if they cannot stand to be near each other, fighting on the trampoline like caged animals.

‘Girls, stop. What’s going on?’ Margie hooks her fingers into the netting wall of the trampoline and presses up close against it. ‘Stop it right now,’ she hisses. ‘What if Harper and Paige see you?’

They are the magic words. Her daughters stop scuffling and separate to each corner of the mat.

‘She’s been drinking.’ Elli points the finger at her sister. ‘She’s lost the plot.’

Maz gives a hollow laugh. ‘Oh, yes, that would suit you, wouldn’t it? Poor, drunk Marianne. No idea what she’s talking about. Well, I do know what I’m talking about. There was something going on between you and Andrew before the accident. Just admit it. You were in love.’

Ellinor and Andrew? What? Is that possible? The idea had crossed Margaret’s mind in the early days when Elli had started talking about her wonderful boss and his incisive wisdom. But she had also strenuously denied any sort of romantic attachment, and when Andrew became involved with Marianne the matter was put beyond doubt. Certainly there was a connection

that remained between Andrew and Ellinor but it seemed more like a brother-sister relationship than anything else.

‘You’ve been *drinking*?’ The question comes from an incredulous Dominic, standing at Margaret’s side. ‘How could you? After what you did?’ His voice is tinged with disgust.

‘I’m sorry? But who even are you?’ Marianne takes a wobbly step forward. ‘This is a private family matter. Leave us alone. You’re nothing but a Christmas ring-in.’

Oh, Marianne, no.

Dominic radiates tension like buzzing electric wires and Margaret’s fingers curl to a fist at her side. This is what the alcohol does to her daughter, makes her belligerent and cruel. ‘Marianne, you need to get off that trampoline.’

‘Who’s going to make me?’

‘You’re pathetic,’ mutters Dominic.

‘Sorry?’ Marianne takes another unstable step and crouches down so she and Dominic are eye to eye and peering at each other through the mesh.

‘Maz, you need to listen to Mum,’ says Elli wearily as she pulls open the gap to exit the trampoline. ‘She’s got something to tell you. We both do.’

‘I’m not getting off until you tell me what’s going on? Who is this guy?’ Maz has backed away from Dominic now. She sits on the rubber mat, arms folded. ‘Some kind of therapist? Someone who can *fix* me?’ She lets out a strange giggle and does jazz hands on the word *fix*. But Margaret senses the fight going out of her. The rage dissipating.

‘Marianne, this is Dominic Crowe. Dianne’s son. Rose’s uncle.’

42

Christmas Day

Marianne

There's nothing more sobering than coming face to face with a ghost from your past. As I crawl off the trampoline, my legs having lost their ability to hold me up, I feel everything starting to quieten inside of me, the alcohol, the anger, the sense of betrayal all melting away into a mess of confusion. Dominic is Dianne's son. The baby's uncle. The shock of it gives way to a tumble of questions. Why is he in my house? Why did Mum bring him here? What does he want with me?

'Everything all right down there?' calls Andrew from the deck. 'Harper thought she heard shouting. But I couldn't hear anything over the mixer.'

'We're fine,' calls Mum. 'We'll be up in a minute.'

Will we? I can barely manage walking let alone stairs. Mum and Elli help me off the trampoline and onto a bench seat that looks out over the wild, untamed scrubby garden that falls away into virgin bushland. Dominic stares, hands on hips, lips set in a thin line, eyebrows furrowed.

'Why are you here?' I keep my gaze down, observe the mess of my skirt, smeared with grime from the trampoline.

'Sweetheart, this is all my fault. I thought if he could just see you and how hard you've worked to get your life back on track. I thought maybe if Dominic could talk to you ...' she trails off. 'I'm so sorry. It was a mistake.'

It would be easy to be angry with Mum—how could she have possibly thought this would be a good idea?—but my rage is spent. Whatever she has done, she has done out of love for me—that's always been her way. Dominic, however, is a different matter.

'Is that why you came, Dominic? To see if I'd actually changed? Some kind of test?'

'I wanted to see for myself how prison had affected you, see if you had reformed your ways. Clearly you haven't.' Dominic's voice is dull and unemotional. 'My sister was right. You're still a danger. If you were truly

‘sorry, if you truly understood what you did, you’d never drink again. I lost my mother and my niece. What did you lose? Nothing. You’re still here, your family is intact, and you’re still drinking. I’m sorry but you are pathetic. All this time, I’ve blamed myself for what happened to Mum and Rose but now I see that they never stood a chance, not with someone like you on the road. You’re a menace and you would always have killed someone, some day.’ He turns to Mum, and the rope-like veins in his neck are knotted with barely restrained fury. ‘Margaret, I’m leaving. Don’t try to stop me.’

Mum, pale and sheened with sweat, nods. Dominic starts walking up the stairs but something in his words gives me the strength to stand. I can’t let him leave like this. I have to make him see that he’s wrong about me. I have learnt. Today, I slipped, I know that, but I have to make him see how I’ve atoned and tried to be the perfect mother, the perfect wife and daughter. ‘Dominic, wait, please.’

‘There’s no point.’

‘There is. Please. This ... This isn’t me. I have changed. I just want to talk.’ We are halfway up the stairs and I reach for his arm to slow him down but the effort throws the two of us off balance and for a moment we are both freefalling through the steamy afternoon air.

43

Christmas Day

Ellinor

It has always been Elli's job to stop her sister from falling. Why would today be any different? Even though Maz has said some truly awful things to her in the last twenty minutes, she is still her sister, so when she begins to tumble on the backyard stairs, Elli is naturally there to catch and steady her, though she manages to scrape Maz's chin and her fist connects accidentally with her eye socket. There are some cuts and there'll be a bruise later. Dominic's arms fling out and find the stability of the railing. He rights himself with a grunt of effort and faces them both, clearly shaken by the near miss.

'Jesus, you could have killed me. What the hell is wrong with you?' He says this more in confusion than anger. Dominic strikes her as a man who is not prone to rage, unless pushed, though it could be argued that he has certainly been pushed today.

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ... To hurt you. I just want to talk. Please stay.' Maz's voice takes on a begging tone.

Near the top of the staircase, Dominic stops. 'Why? So you can convince me how much you've changed, how much I need to forgive you? I can't do that. I'm sorry. But I can't. You know what's sad? My sister is a good person. A very good, kind, loving person. But if she was standing where I am, I suspect she wouldn't hesitate to do something that would hurt you. Or your family. She hates you and I'm starting to see why.'

Dominic stands at the top of the stairs and for a moment, Elli has a terrible thought that it would take little more than a solid push on his behalf to send both her and Maz sprawling.

'Mummy, Mummy, the pavlova's ready. Can we eat it now?' Harper skips out onto the deck and stops when she sees Dominic at the top of the stairs. 'Where's my mum?' she says.

'I'm here, darling. Mummy's coming.' Maz pushes past Dominic, who hasn't moved.

‘Good timing, dessert’s on the table.’ Andrew appears at the doors to the deck with a tea towel slung over his shoulder and Marianne hurries past, holding Harper by the shoulders.

‘Have you got brandy for the pudding? I think I brought some.’ Now Margaret hurries by without meeting anyone’s gaze, leaving Elli, Andrew and Dominic on the deck.

‘Thanks, Andrew, but I have to go,’ says Dominic, going to follow Margaret inside.

‘Go where? It’s Christmas. You can’t leave without having pudding.’ Andrew smiles but beneath that smile is a steel that Elli’s seen so many times before. God, he’s two-faced. She wants so badly to hurt him.

‘Actually, Dominic,’ says Elli. ‘Before you go I think there’s something you need to know about this family.’ She feels the weight of the two men’s eyes on her. Neither has a clue what she’s about to say. ‘About Andrew.’

In the quiet, the only audible sound is the drama-filled operatic music coming from the neighbour’s back deck. But somehow, the thrilling sweep of baritones and strings feels right. Elli has found herself the key player in some weird-arse show here, and there is no choice but to keep going. This climax has been two years in the making and she’s ready to take it on.

‘Well, this sounds intriguing.’ Andrew’s eyes narrow but the smile remains pasted on his face. ‘I can’t imagine what Dominic could possibly find interesting about me.’

‘You’d be surprised,’ says Elli. ‘Dominic’s surname is Crowe. Rings a bell, doesn’t it?’

Oh, the pleasure of watching the blood drain from his face.

‘What?’ Andrew’s face moves from confusion to realisation. ‘What is he doing here? Why are you in this house?’ He speaks through a steel-trap jaw.

‘Mum thought it might be good for him and Marianne to meet. To talk things over. But clearly Maz isn’t quite in the right headspace. Besides, I think it might be more interesting for Dominic to hear from you and me about what we did and what we lied about.’

‘Don’t do this, Elli. You don’t want to do this.’ Andrew closes the gap between them. His face is grey.

‘I think I do.’ She addresses Dominic, adrenaline pumping through her veins. ‘You think my sister killed your mother and niece, but it’s really our fault—him and me.’ She points at Andrew.

Dominic’s eyes swing back and forth in confusion. ‘I don’t understand ... She was drunk. She took a sedative.’

‘There’s a lot more to it than that.’ With her heart thumping like a London rave, Elli tells him the story of the half hour before the accident when she came upon her sister, hiding in the kitchen and incandescent with anger. Maz had heard everything—that Andrew did not love her, that he wanted to leave the marriage, that he was in love with Elli—and she was wild with rage and grief.

‘How could you?’ she’d screamed at Andrew. ‘How could you do this to

our family?’

Andrew had asked her to calm down so they could discuss it rationally, but the entreaty only enraged her further. The first thing to be smashed was the kitchen clock, the next was a framed photo of Andrew and Maz on their wedding day. When she got dangerously close to the knife block, Elli, out of sheer desperation, offered to get her a drink, knowing it was the only thing for which she would sit.

As Andrew attempted to talk his way out of the incriminating conversation, Elli poured a glass of chardonnay from the fridge. What a complete shitshow. Maz was out of her mind with anger and fury, fuelled no doubt by the alcohol she’d already consumed. What she needed was some sleep to sober up and process what she’d witnessed. Her sister was not herself when she was drunk. This Maz was irrational and aggressive. Sleep. That was the key. She had to sleep it off. Things would look different in the morning, Maybe it would be the wake-up call Maz needed. Maybe Andrew’s declarations, as wrongheaded as they were, would be the trigger her sister needed to get help and get sober. But that couldn’t happen while she was in this heightened, tipsy state.

Elli reached for her handbag. She carried her temazepam there so that it was always with her, even when she got called away on a moment’s notice for an overnight work trip. Maz had her back turned and Elli held up the pill packet to show Andrew. He gave her a subtle nod of approval. A sedative was exactly what Maz needed. Turning away from her sister and brother-in-law, she split the pill from its foil packet and used a knife to crush it down. She watched the granules sink to the bottom of the wine glass and used the blade of the knife to help them dissolve. Yes, the alcohol would increase the impact of the sedative, but that could be a good thing. Maz would sleep and Elli wouldn’t leave her side. She would make sure her sister was in the recovery position, she would listen to every single breath.

Maz swallowed the sedative-laced wine in a matter of gulps. ‘You’re so full of shit,’ she spat at Andrew. ‘So full of shit. Just admit it—you love Elli and you want to leave me because I’m a basket case.’

‘That’s not what I said—’

‘It’s exactly what you said.’

‘No, I was explaining to Elli that I felt you were struggling and we’d hit a rough patch in our marriage. But you missed the part where I said how I was determined to find you the help you need and work through all of our problems. I would never leave the girls. I’m not that man.’

Elli had watched Andrew with a growing sense of unease. That wasn’t what he’d said at all. The clear impression was that he was done with trying to fix Maz and wanted to move on, ideally with Elli. What was the truth here? Did he want Elli, or did he want Maz and his family? *Or—she turned the thought over in her mind—does he want both?*

‘Shit. It’s after three. I have to go and pick up the girls from their play date.’ Maz stood abruptly. Her speech had become slightly slurred and she

wobbled as she stood.

'No way.' Andrew went to the key holder near the fridge but Maz got there first. 'You cannot drive in your condition. You stay here with Elli and I'll pick them up.'

'Yeah, right. No fucking way. You just want to take the girls away from me. I'm not letting you go anywhere without me.'

Andrew had let out an exasperated sigh. 'Fine. We'll both go.'

Elli stayed in the kitchen as the fight between Andrew and Maz continued outside. Only once the car doors slammed did she leave the house, taking a few seconds in her own vehicle to use deep breaths and the silence to slow her racing pulse. Would Andrew and Maz still be screaming at each other? She tried to put the thought out of her mind. The temazepam would soon take effect and her sister would hopefully be drifting off to sleep before she saw the girls. She fired off a text to Andrew, reminding him about the medication and advising him to watch Maz closely to ensure her sleep wasn't too deep, that her airways weren't obstructed. She didn't mention their conversation. She would never mention it. With any luck, Maz would forget it too and they'd all pretend nothing had ever happened. God, she hoped so.

She put the car in gear and switched on the radio. The announcer was discussing the state of the economy. Interesting and un-dramatic. Exactly what she needed. She pulled the steering wheel through her hands to navigate the corner as thoughts continued to swirl in her head. What the hell was Andrew thinking? Just how selfish was he to go and spew out all that bullshit? How would they ever work together again? She wasn't really watching the road properly until a strange cloud of fog flashed into her vision, piercing her messy thoughts. Was it steam or smoke? She squinted, leaning forward. It didn't belong in the suburban street. Her gut recoiled and she slammed reflexively on the brake. Shit. That smoke was coming from Maz's car and it was up on the curb. The bonnet crumpled and steaming. Twisted metal and broken glass everywhere. Elli's stomach caved. What had they hit? She pulled off to the side. *Christ, please let Maz be okay.*

Elli's heart slammed against her ribs as she raced towards the car.

Andrew was on the median strip, Maz slumped and unconscious between his legs, a nasty cut above her right eye.

'What happened? What did you hit?'

He was ashen-faced, staring vacantly into the bitumen. 'I can't ... I didn't. Oh, god. I don't know ... She just stepped out with the pram.'

Elli got to her haunches and locked eyes with him. She had to break his trance. 'Who, Andrew? What are you talking about?'

The expression on his face was queer and other-worldly. He spoke in a whisper. 'I didn't see them. It's not my fault. Oh god, I have to ring Dad.' He reached for his phone.

Why the fuck was he calling his dad?

'Andrew,' she spoke firmly. 'We need to call the ambulance for Maz. She's hurt. Call him later.'

Confusion consumed his face. 'But I need to work out what to—'

'Andrew, what do you mean it wasn't your fault? Who was driving? You or Maz?' Surely he hadn't let her take the wheel in her condition? It was unthinkable.

'I can't go to—' He stops, looks at her again, eyes wide with terror. 'It's all Maz's fault. The drinking. The woman just ... just stepped out. The baby.'

Baby? Woman? Elli looked back towards the car. There was something under the wheels. A flash of pink. Christ. Oh, Christ, no. A wave of nausea engulfed her body and against all instincts, she stood, her legs propelling her towards the colour, the horror.

Later, in hospital, two things quickly emerged. Firstly, Maz had no recollection of the accident or anything that happened before it. Secondly, two lives had been lost and Andrew had confirmed, in preliminary discussions with the police, that Maz was at the wheel when the crash occurred. Charges were inevitable, given the alcohol and sedatives in her system.

All of this Andrew had relayed to Elli in the corridor outside Maz's room. His tone was calm, factual. Hers was not.

'Maz was driving? Seriously? You let her? What the fuck were you thinking?' She'd pulled him down the corridor and into the hospital kitchenette, seething with rage.

'When we got to the car, she was ... wild. Totally out of control. She took the keys off me. What was I supposed to do? Wrestle them off her?'

'Yes.' Elli paced the confines of the tiny space.

'You weren't there,' he said sullenly.

'But I was. You saw me put the sedative in her wine. You knew she was in no state to drive.'

'I didn't see anything of the sort.'

'What the fuck are you saying? I sent you the text.'

Andrew closed the distance between them in one stride and grabbed her forearm. 'For fuck's sake, Ellinor. We are both lawyers,' he hissed. 'How the hell do you think it's going to look if we own up to knowingly spiking Marianne's drink before a fatal car crash? Get real for a moment. It's career suicide for us both. Is that what you want? To lose everything we've worked for? To have your nieces thrust into poverty because you've got a guilty conscience?'

Elli disentangled herself from his grip and reached for the wall. His words were having a dizzying effect. The kitchenette was claustrophobic. 'But we have to tell the truth or Maz will go to jail.'

'No, she won't. She can plead not guilty on the grounds of mental health. Her alcohol dependence. This was an accident. The woman stepped straight out in front of her and that's what I'll tell the police. No one could have avoided that accident. No one,' he repeated, his calm restored. That was Andrew: persuasive and convincing, even when he had no right to be.

'But is it true?' Elli spoke weakly. She was so confused. What was real

here? ‘But is it the truth? Did you tell me you loved me?’

Andrew’s face hardened. ‘If you mention a word of that to anyone, I’ll deny it. I’ll say it was you. I’ll tell Maz and your mum that you tried to blow up this family and who do you think they’ll believe? Me? Her loving husband and devoted father? Or you, a washed-up spinster who’s married to her job? You’ll lose them all, you know that.’

Was that true? Would Maz take Andrew’s word over Elli’s? God, it probably was. He was the father to her children. Maz adored him, could see no wrong in him. He was her saviour and yet, here he was, suggesting lies and concealments that would all but guarantee a prison term.

‘But, Andrew, you can’t—’

His hand flew up, ready to strike, and Elli braced for a blow that didn’t come. She opened her eyes to see his fingers poised, quivering.

‘You will do this. It’s the only way.’ He put his hand to her throat, then drew it away, and walked out of the room.

*

‘I don’t get it.’ Dominic rakes a hand through his hair. ‘Elli, you put the sedative in her drink and Andrew knew she wasn’t fit to drive but still let her.’

‘Yes, but no.’ Elli’s teeth chatter, her heart booms in her ears and the opera coming from next door is winding up for a thundering hallelujah chorus. But she has to say this. She has to, for her sister’s sake, for Dominic’s and for her own. If she doesn’t, the guilt will kill her. She’s spent nearly two years obsessing on this, playing the events over and over in her mind. ‘I don’t really know if Maz was driving the car,’ she whispers.

Andrew takes a step towards Elli. ‘You have no proof of this. Absolutely none at all.’

‘But why didn’t you tell the police?’ asks Dominic.

‘I was weak and he was so convincing so ... threatening,’ says Elli. ‘And I didn’t actually see the accident. I thought Andrew was *going* to drive but I didn’t see him get into the car. I didn’t see him in the driver’s seat.’ She puts a hand to her belly. ‘But in my gut, I have serious doubt that Maz was behind the wheel that day.’

‘Your gut is right.’ A cracked and stuttering voice comes from inside the house, so choked with emotion it’s almost impossible to discern what’s being said.

Elli shields her eyes from the glare—the shadow makes it impossible to see who’s standing there but the voice belongs to a female so it must be Mum or Maz.

‘Andrew was the driver.’

The figure steps out from behind the shadows.

‘I saw the whole thing.’

44

Christmas Day

Marianne

I step from the cocoon of the house into the glaring light of the afternoon sun. George's music has quietened and my peripheral vision clocked his back doors closing. He wants no part of this and who can blame him. Andrew is now nothing but a silhouette, a large mass of shadow that obscures all his features. Who is this man I have called my husband? How could he have let me take the blame for this? For two lives?

'Maz, this is bullshit.' Andrew grabs my hands. 'She's lying. She's trying to break us up. Don't you see? She's always had feelings for me and she's pissed off that I never felt the same.'

'That's outrageous.' My sister's voice trembles with rage. 'Maz, I know I stuffed up in putting that sedative in your drink and I've lived with that every day. But you need to believe me—'

I shake my hands from my husband's grasp. 'I do believe you. And I know he was driving. It's why I've been having those visions of his hands on the steering wheel.' It had come to me while I was inside, hearing my sister's confession of the truth. As Elli spoke, I'd closed my eyes and seen it all play out. The argument at home, me reaching for the keys and Andrew taking them off me. Him, driving far too quickly around the corner, shouting at me and paying no attention to the road. The flash in my peripheral vision of an older woman walking towards the bitumen, pushing a pram with a pink blanket. Her, stepping out onto the road. Me screaming, 'No. Stop,' and Andrew wrenching the wheel, his face in a silent scream of horror. The squeal of rubber on bitumen, the whiplash that threw me forward and sideways, glass falling like rain, my forehead colliding with the passenger window before everything faded to black.

'What's going on out here? The pudding's ready to go. The girls are getting desperate. Perhaps we could relocate the party indoors and back to the table? Frank's eager to get on with it.' Mum stands at the French doors

with her hands clasped. The smile evaporates as she registers the stony, distressed faces on the deck.

How do I even begin to tell her what I know? She's loved Andrew like a son. This will crush her but not as much as it had crushed her to have a daughter who killed two people.

I go towards my mum. 'I remembered something about the accident—' Andrew tries to stop me but I shimmy free, flicking off his grip like he has scalded me. He *has* scalded me. He has hurt me in innumerable ways and I'll be damned if he stops me from telling the truth. Silence is violence.

'Darling, I don't understand what's going on but I think you should come inside.' Mum's pitying frown lines make me want to scream.

'No, Mum. You need to hear this. It was Andrew who drove the car. He lied to police and said it was me. He let me take the blame. He took me away from my girls. He ruined me.' My voice is an icefloe that's cracking under pressure. I can barely get the words out.

Mum takes me by the shoulders. 'Marianne, you're not well. This is the alcohol talking.'

'Mum,' I scream. 'It's the truth.'

'Darling, Andrew loves you. He's always supported you. You're not in your right—'

'Mum, stop.' Elli steps forward. 'Please, stop. It's him, it all adds up. He's a bully and a liar. Trust me, please. I've seen it firsthand.'

There is a shift in my mother's eyes. She lets go of my shoulders and for a split second, I miss the touch. Mum has always kept me standing. For all of Margie's faults, her love has always been steadfast.

'You didn't.' Mum's voice is steel and she takes slow, stealthy, menacing steps towards Andrew, a feline unafraid to confront its predator. 'How could you?' The words come out as a gasp.

'It's not true, Margaret. I didn't do it.'

'You did,' I shriek. 'Don't be such a coward.'

Something in that word flips a switch and my husband's face darkens.

'Coward? You think I was being a coward?' he spits. 'It was for the girls. I did it for our daughters. C'mon, Margaret, you remember what Maz was like.' He sounds whiny and childish and Mum's slow but steady progress towards him does not falter. Andrew edges backward. 'You would have done the same. You'd do anything for your girls. I did what I had to do.'

'All you were doing was saving yourself,' I say. 'You know I would have coped. I would have found a way. Elli and Mum would have helped.'

'Oh, yeah?' he says cynically. 'The only thing you could do was unscrew a wine bottle. You were a hopeless, pathetic drunk.'

'You. Bastard.' Mum raises her hands and goes straight for Andrew's neck.

'What the—What are you doing?' He stumbles backward, confused and panicked, and crosses his arms to shield his face.

'You ruined my daughter,' she screeches, clawing at his defences. 'I'll kill you.'

‘Mum. No. Don’t.’ Elli and I go to pull her back. Andrew is a man-mountain compared to my bird-like mother. One swipe and he could completely knock her out.

‘Elli,’ I gasp, wrestling Mum away from him. ‘The girls.’ I can’t let them see this. My sister lets go. She knows what to do. She’ll protect them. But what the hell is Dominic doing? Why isn’t he helping? Look at him, frozen as a statue.

‘For fuck’s sake. What in the devil’s name is going on here?’ The words are spoken as a snarl, almost like a dog bite, and I feel myself being thrown across the deck, Mum sprawled out next to me.

‘What the fuck are you doing to my son?’ The owner of the snarl—Frank—stands in front of Andrew, dwarfing and protecting him.

45

Christmas Day

Dominic

Dominic knows a bully when he sees one. The curl of the lip, the puffed-out chest, the laser-like stare of intimidation—Frank's got them all going on as he stands like a guard dog in front of his son. Elli has disappeared inside, and Dominic rushes to help Margaret to her feet as Marianne slowly clammers back to hers. What kind of man swipes two women aside like they're nothing? A bully, that's who. Dominic senses a rising pressure in his chest. He doesn't like where this is headed. Not at all. It's getting out of hand.

‘They attacked me, Dad. I didn't do anything.’ Andrew cowers against the railing, his fingers worrying over a bleeding cut to his cheekbone that must have come from Margaret's fingernails.

‘You're not a man. You're a coward,’ spits Marianne.

Dominic raises his arms. He can't get air into his lungs his heart is racing so quickly. ‘P-p-p-lease, everyone, if you could p-p-p-lease calm down. Just. Let's talk about this. Calmly.’

‘Who asked you?’ sneers Frank. ‘You're on their side, are you? Typical woman-pleaser.’ He leans in. ‘Wh-wh-what have you got to say to that?’

Margaret pushes herself between Frank and Dominic. ‘You're a cruel, inhuman bully. Like father, like son.’

‘Say that again? My son stuck by your pathetic daughter while she drank herself into oblivion and then disappeared to jail for nearly two years. He did what most men wouldn't. He took responsibility.’

‘He did the opposite,’ cries Margaret. ‘You don't know the half of it. He was driving the car. He killed those people.’

‘You think I didn't know that?’ Frank gives a strange, twisted smile. ‘I've always known. Who do you think he called first? Who do you think told him how to handle the cops? Honestly, your waste-of-space daughter deserved to go to jail for the way she neglected her family.’

‘You. Brute.’ This time when Margaret springs forward, Frank is ready for

attack. He smacks her down with a swipe across the face that sends her flying. ‘See, that’s the way you deal with disobedient women.’

Dominic experiences a strange humming in his brain as Margaret curls in on herself, waiting for another blow.

‘You won’t get away with this.’ Marianne scoops her mother in her arms.

Frank’s laugh is mocking. ‘Won’t I? Who you gonna tell? The police? Like they’re going to take the word of a hopeless alcoholic woman over a highly respected former cop and his son, the lawyer saint who stayed by his alcohol-wife’s side. You’re both worthless. I told Andrew not to get involved. I knew there was a weakness in this family that would one day end in tears.’ Frank shrugs. ‘He wouldn’t listen. He was *in love*.’ He sneers at the words.

‘Dad, stop. Just stop.’ Andrew puts his hand on his father’s arm but Frank shakes it off.

‘What? I’m telling the truth. It’s what you all want, isn’t it?’

‘You’re a bully. You’re nothing but a low-life bully.’ Dominic edges closer. The humming in his brain is getting louder. He’s twanging like electricity wires.

‘And you’re a s-s-s-scaredy-cat,’ Frank jeers. ‘Knew it the first minute I saw you.’

‘Dad. C’mon,’ says Andrew. ‘Let’s just go inside. Cool off.’

‘Why? When we’re having so much fun out here. Who else needs a few home truths? Ellinor—where’s she gone? Back to the girls, eh? Right where she should be. Always lustng after my son. Always the bridesmaid, never the bride. But maybe it would have been better if he married her. She’s a whole lot smarter than mad-Maz.’

‘You need to be quiet now. You’ve said enough,’ says Dominic.

‘I don’t need an interloper to tell me what to do.’ Frank closes the gap between them. The staircase is somewhere behind Dominic and he reaches out for the support of the railing. The humming in his brain won’t go away. It’s confusing him. Frank isn’t Frank any more. He’s every bully that Dominic ever encountered at school, standing over him. Mocking his stutter. Making his life miserable. Making him hate himself. Making him not want to live. He’s twelve again, shoulders hunched, tears at the ready.

‘I hate you.’ He closes his eyes. His body is electric. His brain is a chaos of clashing protons and electrons.

I hate you so much I want to hurt you.

Images of Rose and his mother fly into his vision and when he opens his eyes the energy explodes through his hands and into Frank’s chest. The almighty shove is electrifying and Frank convulses with the lightning bolt to the chest. His eyes fly wide, the whites exposed as he begins to plummet down the staircase.

Andrew lets out a scream—‘Dad, no!’—and his hands flail through the air into which his father is now flying. Frank is a juggernaut, a meteor hurtling through space and burning up in friction with the eucalyptus-fuelled air. Bones crack, blood spurts and from the wild and untamed bushland, the

cicadas roar their approval.

46

Christmas Day

Maz

I've never considered myself a violent or vengeful person, but standing at the foot of Frank's hospital bed, the urge to wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze until he breathes no more rises within me as powerfully as a volcano. I want him dead. Not just because I hate him, though obviously I do, but because I want his son, my husband, to suffer.

My anger is murderous. My heart beats a violent, percussive staccato. What my husband took from me—the time with the girls, my sense of identity, my freedom—can never be restored. He claims he did it to protect the girls and maybe in his twisted mind he believes that to be true. But how convenient that in allowing me to take the fall, he saved his own career and reputation. If only his colleagues could see my pathetic husband now, quivering in the waiting room, still frozen in shock.

I take a step closer to Frank and his unconscious bulk. Apart from the bleeps and wheezes of machinery, the intensive care unit is hushed and gloomy. A young woman, a doctor judging by the stethoscope, sits dozing in a chair beside the bed. If I lay hands on Frank, she'll wake from the commotion, and what then? An arrest for assault? More jail time? No bloody way. I am never going back to prison. I am innocent. I will not miss another day of my girls' lives.

I touch the doctor's shoulder and she startles. I apologise for scaring her, noting the deep shadows under her eyes and the tiny nose piercing that glints like a minuscule third pupil. When she asks me what happened at the lunch, I'm deliberately evasive, as per Elli's instructions. My sister, rational as ever in the face of chaos. 'When the paramedics arrive, we say nothing. Not a word.' She'd said this with her hands on Frank's chest. 'We saw nothing, we heard nothing, we give nothing away.'

Andrew was catatonic with shock—I don't think he even registered what she was saying—and Dominic, when put on the spot by the paramedics,

made up some bullshit about a fall but Elli, Mum and I held firm. Maybe Mum took it a bit far by claiming we didn't even know Frank's name, but she was only following instructions.

No, I didn't really see the accident, I tell the doctor. But Frank wasn't drunk.

I ask about his prognosis. When she says they're doing everything they can to help him, my anger deepens and lava-like tears of rage loom in my eyes. The doctor offers me tissues and a glass of water. She says it's okay for me to remove the surgical mask and I unhook the elastic from my ears, wincing at the tenderness of my skin where Elli grabbed me earlier as I tried to stop Dominic from leaving. I don't need to look in a mirror to know my face is bruised but the doctor watches me keenly, eyes expanding as the full extent of my facial injuries is revealed. Her gaze flicks from Frank to me. I see the brain circuitry connecting in her mind, synapses and assumptions forming.

'Are you okay?' she asks. 'Did he do something to you?'

I take my time in answering, because an idea is composing itself in my brain, complex and brilliant as the score of the Rach 2. I close my eyes, see my fingers flitting over the keys and generating sedimentary layers of terrifying and beautiful sound.

I can do this, is my granite thought. So hard and glittering. *I can make Andrew pay.*

'Yes,' I answer, feeling my volcanic rage start to settle from its spewing and rumbling state into something more viscous and deadly, ready to demolish all in its way. 'Yes. He did do something to me.'

**Police Record of Interview between Marianne Antonio and Inspector
Tim McKay**

Waratah Heights Police Station 27/12/2022

TM: Marianne, I'm going to ask you about the events directly leading up to the death of your father-in-law, Frank Antonio. You've indicated that before the fall, the deceased was in some kind of argument with your husband, Andrew Antonio.

MA: Yes, that's right.

TM: What was the argument about?

MA: After we'd had lunch, Frank attacked me, physically and verbally. He'd been drinking a bit and he shoved me—that's how I got the scratches and the bruised eye. He accused me of being a terrible mother and abandoning my children. No doubt you've seen my record and have some inkling why he'd say such a thing. But my husband took great offence. He stuck up for me. The fight became physical and yes, Andrew pushed his father but he never meant to kill him. It was just an awful stroke of bad luck that Frank happened to be standing at the top of a staircase. You should have seen how my husband tried to reach out and save him, the minute his father started falling. (Sounds of weeping.) It was so awful.

TM: Before Christmas Day, had Frank shown any violent tendencies towards you or anyone in your family?

MA: Not me, directly. But I've spoken to Andrew's brother, Olly. Obviously I had to ring him to let him know about Frank. What he told me is that Frank always ruled the Antonio family with an iron fist—what he said went. Always. I think you understand how it can be challenging for someone who's served the police for so long to separate the personal and the professional. Policing is a vocation, a way of life. Frank spent years and years dealing with crooks and thugs, imposing the law on them. When he came home to the boys he didn't accept any challenge to his authority. None. And that was terrifying for them. Awful. The constant pressure to be perfect. Never mess up. Never admit a vulnerability. That's a damaging environment for a child.

TM: But your husband is not a child.

MA: No, but I'm trying to explain why he did what he did.

TM: Your husband claims he did nothing. In fact, he says that it was (sounds of shuffling paper) Dominic Crowe who pushed your father-in-law and caused him to fall. He says you, your mother and your sister are all lying, that you've banded together in a conspiracy to protect Dominic and incriminate him, but he won't offer us a reason as to why you might do that.

MA: My husband, he's in shock, Inspector. He'll never forgive himself for what he did and I'm sure he wishes that this was Dominic's fault, and I do too of course. But we have to be truthful about what happened. I'm an honest person, Inspector. You'll see from my own record with the police that I've always been as forthcoming as possible—first to admit guilt and pay the price for my crime. It saddens me to think my husband doesn't have the same values but he's only human and deep down, he's a very good man. He loved his father, despite everything Frank did to him. The constant berating. The immense pressure. Andrew absorbed it all until he just couldn't. But if you have any doubt about what I'm saying, why don't you talk to my neighbour George Donnelly. He saw the whole thing happen on the deck—Andrew pushing his father down those stairs. He told me so this morning.

TM: My officers spoke to Mr Donnelly late on Christmas afternoon and he told us nothing.

MA: I believe he was frightened, Inspector. You know as well as I do that older gay men and the police don't have the best history. Talk to him again. I'm sure he'll be more forthcoming.

TM: I find it curious that Dominic Crowe was present at your house. I've read the notes on your background and I understand his association with your family. It's plausible that a man in his position might want to take revenge against you and your family.

MA: It is plausible but it's not what happened. Dominic is a forgiving man. We've had long chats in the last twenty-four hours. I know he didn't come to lunch with the intention of hurting anyone. He didn't hurt anyone. He came because he wanted to offer me his forgiveness. He's a very decent person.

TM: Tell me this, Marianne. I've spoken to the paramedics and they say that when they arrived, none of you would tell them anything. In fact, Dominic told them that none of you saw the fall at all. Your mother even denied knowing who Frank was. Now, why is that? Why all the secrecy?

MA: Inspector, I'm sure you can appreciate it was a chaotic, confusing situation. None of us wanted to believe it had happened and maybe that was a coping mechanism, I don't know. I can't speak for the others, but I was just focused on getting medical help for Frank. When my mother said we didn't know Frank, she was being truthful. Obviously we knew his name but we didn't *know* him in the way you'd expect to know a family member. Andrew hadn't told me much about his childhood—maybe he was ashamed, or maybe he was still frightened of Frank. I don't know. We had no idea Frank was capable of such violence and in that way, he was virtually a stranger to us. Surely you've had that experience where you think you know a person and they do something that makes you realise you don't really know them at all. I mean, take my husband, for example. Anyone who knows Andrew will find it almost impossible to believe what he did, even though I'm sure he didn't really intend to hurt anyone.

TM: I'm sorry, Marianne, but I need to be clear because even if it wasn't intentional, the fact is that a life has been lost and we need to find out who was responsible. In all likelihood, that person will go to jail. You're telling me it was your husband who pushed Frank down those stairs.

MA: (Sounds of weeping.) Yes, that's what I'm telling you.

Epilogue

One year later

Marianne

Father Ramesh gives me the nod and, through quivering fingers, I play the opening chords to 'Oh Come, All Ye Faithful' in a church that's redolent with December heat, Christmas excitement and parental expectation. Are they watching me? Are they whispering 'She's *that* woman,' to each other, with knowing looks. Maybe they are. Maybe they're not. I don't actually care any more. What matters to me is how the children's voices lift sweetly into the church's vaulted ceiling and my heart skips at the pink innocence of the sound. Harper stands at my shoulder, ready to turn the pages of the music and Paige beams at me from the altar where she stands amid the nativity angels—so proud of her talented mum.

By the second verse, the nerves are gone and my fingers find the keys without effort. It's years since I've performed in public and I'd forgotten this—the rush of making something beautiful that causes my heart to enlarge until it's pressing against my chest bone. When the opening song is done, I exhale quietly and turn my gaze towards the front row where George is sitting. He gives me a wink. Maybe there's even a hint of moisture in his eyes and who could blame him for being moved by the honest purity of the sound. Since the accident he's become a de facto family member, like a great uncle, showing immense kindness to the girls and I in his own gruff way. Apart from our shared devotion to classical music, we've found plenty in common including our love of nature and a shared belief that my husband is 'a massive arsehole'. I'd probably use other words but the sentiment is similar. When I'd asked George to join us for the nativity his face had lit up like the fake Christmas tree sitting in our lounge room—the only decoration I've put up so far. Where last year I would have been horrified at my lack of effort, I don't have the time or inclination this time around and the kids don't seem to care. My standards have dropped and we're all the happier for it. Between my job and nativity rehearsals, December has been hectic, but happily so.

To think I initially turned down Father Ramesh when he asked me to be the nativity's accompanist. He wanted real, live music, not that crap taped

stuff with American kids singing over the top. ‘And you are the perfect person, Marianne.’ He could not have looked more pleased with himself.

‘I know *you* think it’s fine for me to do it,’ I said. ‘Because everyone deserves a chance and who are we to judge and everyone’s moved on, et cetera, et cetera, but you’re a priest and it’s your job to believe that. The other parents don’t. You’ll have no angels at all when they find out that I’m involved.’

But Father Ramesh had simply given me one of his cheeky smiles. ‘I find that parents who think this way tend to have little devils with terrible voices who do not belong in a choir of angels.’

In the end, I agreed—on the condition that all parents be advised in advance, thus allowing them to make an informed decision. I was done with lies and concealment. If I’d learnt anything from the last few years, it was that secrets were the kindling to the bonfire of shame that had existed in me for far too long.

To my surprise and delight, the number of kids volunteering for this year’s choir actually went up by 50 per cent. Even more shocking, I’d started to field a growing number of enquiries from parents seeking private piano tuition for their children, mostly because the kids had told them how much fun I was in rehearsals and how well I played the songs.

‘See? You are yesterday’s news, Marianne.’ Father Ramesh had given me another one of those smiles. ‘Parents want to protect their kids but they also want perfect piano playing. This nativity is the start of something for you.’

Perhaps. Let’s just say I’m quietly optimistic that 2024 will be a good year for us. The girls miss their dad, that goes without saying, but Mum’s been an incredible help, moving in to share care while I work in an admin role for a labour hire company—not my first choice of job but piano teaching hasn’t felt like an option, not until now. The girls are happy at St Paul’s and the Antonio family has been quite the talk of the school this year. To some, I’ll always be the drunk driver who killed two people and Andrew will always be the son who killed his overbearing father. Neither is true, but as George always tells me, ‘Opinions are like arseholes. Everyone has them and they’re not worth shit.’

I know the facts and I’m learning to be comfortable with who I am and the history I hold inside of me. I haven’t touched any alcohol since Christmas last year and have no intention of touching it ever again. Knowing that Mum shares my condition has somehow made it easier to handle the odd craving. Now, I see the alcoholism as the hereditary illness it really is, rather than a personality defect that I brought into being because I wasn’t strong enough to cope with life. My therapist has helped me see how Dad’s death was so formative in my upbringing. I was always looking for a protective father figure in my life—and that’s what led me to Andrew. Our relationship wasn’t ever the beacon of perfection I’d thought it was. I see now how needy I was for love and security and how he was initially drawn to that, but eventually got tired of playing the role of protector and saviour. Before the accident in

which Rose and Dianne died, he'd cracked and realised he couldn't fix me. That was true—the only person who could fix me was me. I'm not saying I forgive him for what he did but I have a better understanding of it now.

At the end of the nativity, Father Ramesh thanks the teachers and parents for supporting the rehearsals. He makes the usual recommendation to attend reconciliation, and I'm taken back to that moment, one year ago, where I was such an anxious, guilt-ridden wreck as I spilled out my fears to Father Ramesh.

On the altar, he brings his hands together. 'And finally, to our accompanist extraordinaire, Marianne Antonio. I think we can all agree that she has made this year's nativity the best ever.'

To my shock, the applause is warm and thunderous. When I bring myself to look into the crowd, I see smiling faces and nods of approval and my muscles relax in relief. George is on his feet and a few have joined him in the standing ovation. Perhaps what Father Ramesh said is true—memories are short and people move on. It seems I am forgiven or perhaps what they see tonight is so at odds with what they've heard that only one depiction can be true—and that's the person they see before them. But here is what I also know: a person can play many songs, be many different people. I am and will always be an alcoholic.

On the way out of the church, hand in hand with Paige and Harper, and George shuffling alongside of us, I field more compliments from parents. So many that it's starting to get embarrassing. The kids drag me along, desperate to get to the pizza I've promised them.

'Marianne, hi. So nice to see you. That was absolutely beautiful. So special. Your playing is fabulous.' Jamila stops me with her hand on my forearm, the wide-eyed Luna by her side.

'Thank you, Jamila. That's very kind of you.'

'Any plans for Christmas?' she asks, slinging her sleek Prada bag to her shoulder. Her poise should intimidate me, but it doesn't. Not any more.

'We're going to Queensland for a break, but other than that, not much.'

I've officially finished my parole and on Christmas Eve, we're driving to the Gold Coast for a week of beach and theme parks. We'll have Christmas Day on Burleigh Beach with a picnic of fish and chips and a swim in the afternoon. George will do his usual *Messiah* and whiskey routine and keep an eye on my house. 'Just in case another arsehole decides to throw some bastard down the stairs again.' When he says things like that, an expression of understanding passes between us. I'll always be grateful for the way he backed my version of events. He says the gratitude isn't necessary. It's justice, he tells me. My husband got exactly what he deserved.

'Well, Queensland sounds lovely. How about a play date when you get home? And maybe some more piano lessons? Luna thinks you're fabulous.' Jamila waits for my answer, brow furrowed. Weirdly, I get the feeling that thanks to tonight's performance, I may have gone from being the school pariah to a minor, infamous celebrity.

‘Maybe. I’ll think about it and give you a call when we’re home.’

She pats my arm. ‘You do that. Have a wonderful Christmas.’

Outside, the crowd of parents and kids has largely dispersed and the air is soft and warm as bathwater. On our way to the car, the kids chat to George about their least-favourite and most-favourite teachers, and my phone bleeps with a message.

Happy Christmas from Carnaby Street! Elli’s getting enormous. Love to the girls. Xx

I zoom in on the photo. Mum’s face is white and pink with cold and she has her hand on my sister’s belly, which might explain why Elli looks less than impressed. There’s a halo of Christmas lights around them; angels, reindeer, mistletoe—the ultimate Yuletide fantasy.

‘Girls, check out the photo of Grandma and Auntie Elli.’

Harper and Paige crowd around.

‘Auntie Elli looks cross.’ Harper uses two fingers to enlarge the image.

Paige lolls against my legs. ‘When will we meet her baby? I’ve always wanted a little sister.’

‘I don’t know, honey. Maybe they’ll come out next Christmas.’

But will I want to see her? I’m so happy that Elli achieved the pregnancy with a donor egg and sperm. This baby will have a better chance if it has none of our family’s genetic material. I want so much for the girls to know their little cousin and maybe in twelve months I’ll have forgiven Elli for lying to me about the temazepam and the argument in which my husband confessed his feelings for her. My rational brain wants to forgive her. She was bullied by Andrew into lying. She’d used the sedative with good intention. In my condition, I was dangerous and she wanted to calm me. But. My heart is chipped. Elli is not quite the perfect person I thought she was. The same can be said of Andrew, and Mum. All of them lied to me. Lied to each other. And I lied to myself, too.

‘Will Daddy be home by next Christmas?’ asks Harper as we hop into the car. George in front, the two girls in the back.

‘Maybe.’

‘If you’re unlucky,’ mumbles George.

It’s possible that Andrew will get early parole, like I did, but as I navigate the car through the streets, I don’t tell the girls that by next Christmas their father and I will be divorced. The house will have to be sold and with such a criminal record it’s unlikely Andrew will ever work again as a lawyer—a fact that provokes a deep well of anger in him. Objectively, his sentence was a good result—the judge took into account Frank’s bullying ways and his Christmas Day attack on me as mitigating factors. I’ll always believe the world is a better place without Andrew’s father in it, and this is what I tell Dominic when we occasionally catch up and he expresses deep remorse over how things panned out. He’s an uncle now and baby Zoe is one of the lights of his life. He shows me photos of this child and her deep shock of black hair. In these pictures, the baby’s mother, Lou, bears a smile that doesn’t quite

reach her eyes. Dominic has told his sister everything—how he caused Frank's death, how Andrew caused Rose and Dianne's. 'I thought she'd laugh or cry or hit me or hug me or something. But she was just ... sad.'

I get it. When someone dies in an accident, you think taking revenge or giving forgiveness or assigning blame or making someone take responsibility is going to make you feel better. But grief is about missing a person and none of those things—the revenge, the forgiveness, the blame—can bring them back. My mother believed she needed the forgiveness of others for what happened to Dad but what she really needed was to forgive herself, which I think she has.

But I cannot pardon Andrew for what he did to me and it's untenable for us to live together again as husband and wife. All trust has gone. His in me. Mine in him. And this was confirmed in our visit to him last week. Andrew didn't want me to come, and certainly didn't want the girls to see him like that—green tracksuit, overweight from too much lying in a cell, trapped like a mouse in a cage. But I ignored his wishes. Like I say, secrecy is a cancer that eats you from within.

I'd warned the girls about the body scanners but when Harper stepped up for her turn she'd glanced at me with uncertainty in her eyes and I gave her a reassuring nod to cover the pang of guilt in my stomach. In years to come, how would my girls process all of this? When would they realise just how strange it was to have had both parents—outwardly normal middle-class Australians—spend time in prison? I needed to start putting away money now for the therapy.

We were ushered into a garden of grass and small trees where families sat at tables and chairs, talking, smiling, crying. It could have been any suburban park in Australia, except that every single man was in a green tracksuit and the space was contained by four-metre-high steel fences and curls of barbed wire. In the corner was a lone figure with a particular slope in his shoulders that marked him as my husband.

'Daddy's over there.' I pointed him out to the girls and they tore across the grass, hair and feet flying.

'Marianne.' Andrew had said my name as if I was a stranger to him and not his wife of more than ten years. He hates me; he's told me that several times. I have taken everything from him, he says. But here's how I see it: his lies put me in jail. My lies put him in jail. Surely we are even. His rage will lessen with time, just as mine has. Or maybe it won't. Not my problem.

These are the thoughts that waltz about my mind as I pull the car into a vacant spot near the pizza place. I give George a hand to get out and bundle the girls into a cheap and cheerful joint that I might once have shunned for its plastic checked tablecloths and fake chianti bottles hanging from the ceiling but now embrace as a charming eatery, perfect for a single mother needing an affordable fast-food option for her children. George watches, mesmerised, as Paige and Harper chatter on about the nativity and how the real baby Jesus was so cute and maybe Santa might bring Paige a baby doll

just like him for Christmas. She so desperately wants one. A baby sister would be even better but she'll settle for the toy. The words twang at memories. Me and Elli. Mum. My baby doll, Claudia. How it all began. My need for love. My yearning to be a mother. I watch my girls, who know so much and so little about me.

‘Can I tell you girls a story?’

They lean in, eyes turned to me, so open and bright. So full of curiosity.

I begin to speak.

Acknowledgements

Oh my gosh, dear reader, you made it to the end! Or maybe, like me, you've skipped ahead to the acknowledgements to work out why the heck this story was written. Good question. Have you ever attended a family lunch and felt ready to gently (or not so gently) throttle a loved one? You are not alone! Much as I love and adore my family (who are truly excellent people) I do feel a particular kind of rage settles over me as Christmas looms into view. We all rush around as if the world is about to end—the gifting, the socialising, the work deadlines—madness. My starting point for this book was a woman feeling intense pressure to deliver on the perfect Christmas for her family but developed from there into an exploration of a mum trying to atone for a truly unforgivable act, a woman with alcohol dependence issues who looks nothing like the scruffy person on the street drinking out of a brown paper bag. We tend to make jokes and memes out of mummy wine-culture but I wonder if we need to ask some tougher questions about why some women need a drug to help them survive daily life?

This book adopts a darker tone than my previous work and I'm so delighted that my publisher Jo Mackay connected with the voice and has been such a huge champion for Marianne's story. Jo—thank you—you have gone above and beyond and I'm so grateful. Thanks as well to Suzanne O'Sullivan for her careful and gentle editing, and the lovely Annabel Blay, whose emails always make me smile. I'm awful at proofreading so thank goodness for Annabel Adair and her incredible attention to detail. To the HQ marketing team—Jo Munroe, Stuart Henshall and Eloise Plant—you are always so enthusiastic and brimming with exciting ideas. You also know where to get the best dumplings. #thethingsthatmatter. The Harper Design Studio was definitely put to the test with this cover and Louisa Maggio came through with flying colours—literally. Cerise is my favourite, closely followed by blue. Thank you for reading my mind and knowing exactly the cover that this book needed. To the wider HarperCollins/HQ team, lead by CEO Jim Demetriou, Sales Director Karen-Maree Griffiths and HQ Publishing Director Sue Brockhoff—thank you for the support and the chance to get a fourth book into the world.

To my writer friends and colleagues, big hugs for the solidarity, encouragement and venting/ranting opportunities. We choose this writing

life (or it chooses us!) and it's a fabulous privilege but it's also a damn hard road. Book writing is a contagion and only those who have caught 'the bug' really get it. Special mention must be made of the poor authors who I forced to read an advance copy of the book. You were so kind and enthusiastic, it made me blush.

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The character of Inspector Tim McKay is named in honour of Tim Oner, who won the bidding at auction to have a character named after him in one of my books. Thanks, Tim, for your generous support of the NBRF's crowdfunding campaign.

Book people are the best people—scientific studies have confirmed this. And when I say 'scientific' I mean my random anecdotal experiences with booksellers, bloggers, podcasters and reviewers. You share your enthusiasm so generously and you centre stories in your life which is a truly noble mission—the world is a better place when people read. Thank you for championing all books, including mine.

My family. No, I don't actually want to kill any of you. Quite the opposite. Mum and Dad—please continue your one-eyed support for my career—I could write a phone book and you would probably buy it and force it on all your friends as well. How lucky am I! Jenny—I'm continually inspired by your zest for life and stubborn refusal to give into the vagaries of ageing—and you're a prolific reader, too. What a combo! To my siblings—Murray and Sadie—both tremendous and very decent human beings who happen to be married to equally excellent individuals and have spawned a crew of awesome nieces and nephews who I adore. Hamer/Davis/Dickerson catch-ups are loud and interesting, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Ruby, Sasha, Lucy—okay, let's be real—you're not perfect but you're perfect *to me*. You give me purpose and love and a whole new vocabulary that I'll probably never master. Being your mum is the best thing I've ever done and will ever do.

Actually, marrying your dad probably tops it. Best drink I ever spilt that night in the Centennial Hotel. On 17 April 2004, we started a conversation that's still going strong, twenty years later. You get this writing caper in a way that most wouldn't and *thank you* doesn't even come close to the gratitude and love I feel for the life we have together.

Lastly but most importantly, to you dear reader. Thank you for choosing to spend some hours in my fictional world. There are so many other things you could be doing/watching/reading—and you chose this book, for which I'm deeply grateful. Books make us better, but you already know this. You are stars.

Author's Note

If this book has raised issues for you, the following resources may be helpful

Getting help for addiction in Australia:

Alcoholics Anonymous

Phone: 1300 222 222

Web: aa.org.au

Alcohol and Drug Foundation

Phone: 1800 85 85 84 Web: adf.org.au

Getting help for addiction in New Zealand:

Alcoholics Anonymous

Phone: 0800 229 6757

Web: aa.org.nz

Alcohol Drug Helpline

Phone: 0800 787 797

Web: alcoholdrughelp.org.nz

Other support services in Australia:

Lifeline Australia 24-hour crisis support line: 13 11 14 / lifeline.org.au

Beyond Blue 24-hour support line: 1300 22 4636 / beyondblue.org.au

1800 RESPECT: 1800 737 732 / 1800respect.org.au

Other support services in New Zealand:

Lifeline Aotearoa 24/7 support helpline: 0800 543 354 / Text 'Help' to 4357 / lifeline.org.nz

Are you OK? Helpline: 0800 456 450/ areyouok.org.nz

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